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10
My Next Life as a VILLAINESS: ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!

Cyrus Lanchester
Magical Ministry employee and country nobleman
Magic type: Fire
Special skill: vegetable farming
Katarina Claes
Magical Ministry employee and duke's daughter
Magic type: Earth and Dark
Items: Dark Familiar
Dark Covenant
Dark ???
Special skill: Making people fall in love with her
Maria Campbell
Magical Ministry employee
Magic type: Light
Items: Light Covenant
Bear-shaped magic tool
Special skill: baking
Katarina, the villainess, is faced with Bad Ends more terrible than ever! What will she do?
➡ Practice Dark Magic
➡ Practice her farming skills
➡ Practice her sword skills
Congratulations! Katarina found a new Dark Magic item. Villainess points increased.

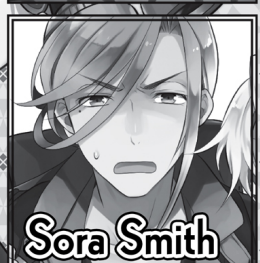
My Next Life as a VILLAINESS

Katarina Claes

The only daughter of Duke Claes. Has a slightly menacing look (in her words: "villainess face"). Regained the memories of her past life and changed from a spoiled noble child into a wild, slightly problematic one. Simple-minded, forgetful, and easily carried away, but honest and loyal. Below average in both academics and magic. Earth Magic user.

Nicol Ascart

Son of Count Ascart, counselor to the King. Beautiful like a doll. Very loving brother. Wind Magic user.



Sora Smith

A Fire and Dark Magic user working at the Ministry. He is a romanceable character in FL2, and he likes Katarina.

★ Larna Smith

The director of the Magical Tool Laboratory and Katarina's superior. She is talented but weird.

★ Cyrus Lanchester

The serious and strict director of the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

★ Raphael Wolt

A talented boy working at the Ministry. Has a very calm personality.

★ Dewey Percy

A child prodigy who skipped grades to end up working at the Magic Ministry. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

★ Pochi

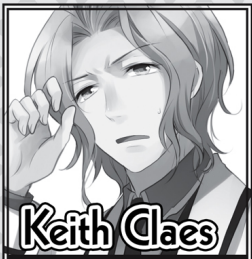
A Dark Familiar who usually lives inside Katarina's shadow.

★ Liam

A boy living in an orphanage in Sorcié.

ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!

Characters

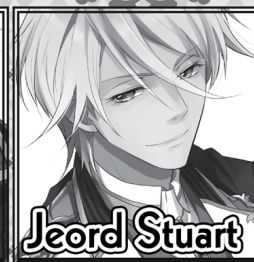


Keith Claes

Katarina's younger brother, adopted by Duke Claes from a distant branch of the family because of his magic prowess. Sensual and handsome. Earth Magic user.

Alan Stuart

Jeord's younger twin and fourth crown prince. Ruggedly handsome and self-centered. Talented musician. Water Magic user.



Jeord Stuart

Third crown prince. Katarina's fiancée. Has the stereotypical good looks of a blonde, blue-eyed prince, but has a calculating, dark personality. Met Katarina when he had lost interest in everything else. Fire Magic user.

Maria Campbell

A chosen girl who wields Light Magic despite being born a commoner. Hard worker and protagonist of the otome game. A very good baker.

Mary Hunt

Fourth daughter of a marquis and Alan's fiancée. Sweet and beautiful. Known as a paragon of ladylikeness among noble society.

Sophia Ascart

Daughter of Count Ascart, and Nicol's younger sister. Bullied by those around her because of her white hair and red eyes since childhood. Calm and collected.

★ Cezar Dahl

Ethenell's prince. He is young, tan, and handsome.

★ Anne Shelly

Katarina's personal maid. Has been serving her since Katarina was eight years old.

Table of Contents

Cover
Color Illustration
Character Introductions

Chapter 1: Life at the Magical Ministry
Chapter 2: Learning Dark Magic
Chapter 3: Vegetable Delivery
Chapter 4: Shopping in the Little Town
Chapter 5: Back to the Orphanage
Chapter 6: Dark Magic

Afterword
Bonus Short Stories
Bonus Textless Illustration
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Chapter 1: Life at the Magical Ministry

The warm afternoon sun, shining on the lexicons I had open in front of me, was making me terribly sleepy. I, Katarina Claes, was doing my very best to stay awake. I never liked studying theory, and even back at the Academy of Magic I often had to fight with sleepiness... The sleepiness would usually win. It was especially difficult to stay awake right after lunch, when I was full and cozy.

When I was tasked with cleaning or making deliveries for the Magical Tool Laboratory, at least I was always moving, but all I had to do right now was to read through this boring Dark Covenant. Using my head at this time of the day was the worst. I thought back with nostalgia to my recent mission at Ocean Harbor, where being undercover as a waitress meant that I didn't have to worry about sleepiness at all. Of course, I knew that every minute I spent reminiscing was a minute that hadn't gone toward completing the task at hand, but I couldn't continue at all unless I did something about this drowsiness.

Maybe visualizing mother's angry face would wake me up, I thought, but I was so used to her being mad at me that it didn't work. The things one can get used to... *Oh, I know, thinking of the ever-impending doom constantly casting its shadow over me, threatening my life, will wake me up!*

True enough, I was indeed constantly threatened by catastrophic doom.

It all started when, as an eight-year-old girl, I tripped and hit my head on a rock. The impact made me recover the memories of my past life, when I lived as an otaku high school girl in a country called Japan. Those new memories made me less of a spoiled brat, but they brought with them a terrible realization.

What I realized was that I was now living in the world of "FL," *Fortune Lover,* the otome game which I was playing right up until my untimely death in my previous life. This, by itself, wasn't that terrible. The problem was that I'd been reincarnated as Katarina Claes, daughter of Duke Claes, the game's evil antagonist who was

destined for doom! The only reason Katarina Claes existed was to hinder the protagonist in her romantic endeavors with the romanceable characters... Learning all that was quite the shock.

At the time, I was eight years old, but the plot of FL was set to start when I, at fifteen, would join the Academy of Magic. I spent seven years preparing for that, and someway, somehow, I managed to escape all of the catastrophic endings that the game had in store for me. Relieved, I was already dreaming of the safe, calm life that was to come. I'd even started working at the Magical Ministry, one of the kingdom's governmental institutions, together with Maria, the game's protagonist, who was now also my friend.

So far so good... What I didn't know back then was that there was actually a sequel to FL, *Fortune Lover II: Love at the Magical Ministry*! In this sequel, Maria would try to romance new and returning characters, while Katarina came back once again to make trouble for her! And of course, Katarina was still headed for catastrophe no matter what happened in the game! After all that effort I'd put into avoiding doom... What happened to the future I'd envisioned? What happened to my peaceful retirement, relaxing on a rocking chair with a cat on my lap?!

But even though I was disappointed, I swore to myself: *I won't lose to you, game developers! I'm going to get my peaceful retirement whether you want it or not!*

I started looking for ways to avoid the aforementioned catastrophic endings, aided by dreams I sometimes had that showed me a friend from my past life playing FL2 and a mysterious note I'd found which had information about the game written on it in Japanese.

To be honest, though, it wasn't going that well. I looked at my shadow, inside which Pochi, my Dark Familiar, always hid. He was a cute puppy, but he could turn huge when he needed to. Then I looked back at the Dark Covenant in front of me. Dark this, Dark that... I couldn't get any more villainous if I tried. I even remembered, in one of those dreams, seeing Katarina, with Pochi by her side and the covenant in her hands, laughing evilly. Maybe this was the game's doing, somehow forcing me to follow its plot, and that made me fear that I'd actually turn into the evil villainess I was supposed to be.

But wait... If the Katarina in the game was laughing while holding the covenant, does that mean that she could read the ancient script on

it? How can she be smarter than me?! Where does she find the time to study between stalking Jeord and being evil?!

"Lady Katarina, is everything fine?" Maria, my beautiful blonde-haired, blue-eyed friend, asked. "You were making such a pained expression... Could it be that you are hungry?"

"Oh, don't worry, I was just thinking about stuff," I reassured her.

"Stuff... Would that be the covenant?"

After all, I had the covenant open in front of me. You'd never guess I was thinking about the information on my evil destiny that I got through a mystical connection with my past life. And I certainly couldn't tell her about it either.

"Y-Yeah, the covenant. It's so hard to read, you know. I'm not making any progress," I replied. No lie there.

I was never the smartest girl around, and I'd promptly forgotten all that I'd learned at the Academy of Magic the second I was done with my exams. As a result, this ancient script that I was looking at right now was completely unreadable to me. Even Maria, who *was* smart, was having trouble reading her own covenant, since the script it was written in was even older than the ancient script we'd learned about at the academy, and it used very difficult grammar. What chance did I stand?

The worst part was that the Dark Covenant had some sort of magical copyright protection applied to it, meaning that I couldn't write down the text as I saw it and let someone else read it for me. This was why I was having so much trouble reading through the thing.

Between the International Assembly and my undercover mission right after that, I hadn't had a lot of time to actually work on it, and the only parts that I'd deciphered were the long foreword and the basic magic for mind control.

"What about you? How far have you gotten?" I asked Maria, who was doing the same thing as me, but with the Light Covenant.

"Hmm... I have been able to read further than last time, but this latest section only described how to amplify the spells I already knew, so I have not actually learned any new ones."

Unlike me, she'd already learned spells from the book and even used some of them.

"Oh, that sounds interesting," I said, surprised that the Light Covenant wasn't just a collection of spells.

“It surely is. For example, there are instructions on how to make healing magic more powerful. That sounds like it would be very useful,” she said with a smile as the sun shone behind her. Once again, she was the very definition of a likeable otome game protagonist. “Most likely, your covenant also says how to make your spells more powerful,” she continued.

“You think so?” I replied skeptically, unable to comment either way as of yet.

She talks about her magic being useful, but my covenant is the Dark *Covenant. Even if I can make the mind control spells more powerful, I wonder if that could ever be useful... Wait a second, mind control?*

“Hey!” I shouted, jumping out of my chair. “Now that I think of it, I can’t use any Dark Magic to begin with!”

Startled, Maria blinked, then answered, “But you have the Dark Familiar Pochi, do you not?”

“Well, yeah. But I don’t know any actual spells.”

What’s more, Pochi didn’t always come out of my shadow when I asked him to. Could you even call that a familiar? Maybe he just saw me as someone who provided him a place (my shadow) to live in. That would mean that I, all things considered, wasn’t really a Dark Magic user.

“I believed that you could use Dark Magic but chose not to,” Maria said, “but if that is not the case, then...there might be no point in reading the Dark Covenant.”

Indeed! No point in deciphering this stuff! What’s all this effort for?! And after all the time I spent hunched over this desk! I was in despair, holding my head in my hands, when I heard the door open and saw a familiar face step in.

“So, how is it going? What’s with the long face?”

That was Larna, my superior. Since she was here, I decided I’d tell her about the issue I’d just identified.

“And that is why deciphering it could all be for nothing,” I concluded, pointing at the covenant.

Larna nodded. “You sound like you just realized that, but I’d already predicted this,” my superior announced. “In fact, I knew you couldn’t use Dark Magic since back when we experimented with you and Pochi.”

“Really?!”

“We asked you about that during the experiments. Don’t you remember?”

"I... Y-Yes... You did ask me about that, I think..."

To be honest, that was such a stressful period that I barely remembered anything at all, but now that she mentioned it, we'd done that kind of experiment.

"As we see it," she went on, "you have a Dark Familiar living inside your shadow, but you can't use Dark Magic per se. Our plan is to have you decipher the covenant for research reasons. If there are any spells that look safe, we'll have Sora, who can actually use Dark Magic, test them."

"Oh, I see!" I said, glad to know that my effort at least wasn't going to be in vain.

Maria, however, didn't look relieved. She addressed Larna. "I just learned about Lady Katarina not being able to use Dark Magic spells, so I did not know about your plan until now... Unfortunately, I believe that it will not work."

"Huh?!" I shouted.

"Why would that be?" Larna asked, looking worried.

"After deciphering a spell, I can explain its effects to other people, but if I try to explain how it is performed, I find myself unable to speak," Maria explained, furrowing her brow.

"I didn't know about that! How did you discover this phenomenon?" Larna asked.

"Up until now, I have only reported on what the spells I have found are able to do. However, yesterday I was told that the Ministry would assemble other Light Magic users so that I may pass on the knowledge to them."

"That makes sense," Larna commented, "since we wouldn't be able to use Light Magic even if you explained it to us. That's why they're going to call people who can."

I'd never heard anything about that...

"Yes. This was not an issue for me. The problem, however, was when I tried to organize the information I had learned so that it would be easier to explain it to others. I tried writing it down, but the pen would not move. Then I tried to practice saying it aloud, but no sound would come out of my mouth."

"You just learned about that yesterday? And did you report on it?"

"Yes. Yesterday, as soon as I learned about it, I reported to Mister Cyrus."

As expected of Maria.

"So that's why I hadn't heard of it yet... I skipped today's meeting," Larna said, mumbling the second part under her breath.

As expected of Larna.

"But if you can neither write nor tell other people about how to perform the spells, then it means that only the owner of a covenant can use the magic inside it. That must be why there was no document giving details about them. A really interesting couple of books, aren't they? I wonder how I could get one myself," she continued, obsessed as usual with all rare and mysterious kinds of magic.

"But, if this is true, then...doesn't it mean that there's no point in me deciphering this?" I asked, scared of the answer.

"That could be the case, yes," Larna replied, looking disappointed.

"No way!" I shouted in despair, thinking of all the effort I'd wasted on this cursed book.

"Well, you can at least tell what kind of spells they are, so it won't be completely useless," Larna tried to comfort me to little effect. Basically, she was saying that it'd just be *only mostly* useless.

All this ancient script that I've painstakingly deciphered... All this time and effort... Okay, I barely went past the foreword, but still...

"Hmm... I'll go confirm something with Cyrus. You rest for a bit and wait here, okay?" Larna said, patting my shoulder before leaving the room.

I felt so exhausted that I dropped onto the desk. The sleepiness from before came back even stronger, and since this time I'd been told to rest, I decided not to fight against it.

"Lady Katarina..." I heard Maria call me, probably worried about me.

"I'm a bit sleepy... I'll rest my eyes for a second..." I told her as I slipped into a dream.

Pink walls, a black table, and a metal-frame bed with azure duvets and blue cushions: I was in a place that I'd become accustomed to seeing in my dreams, the bedroom of my friend Acchan.

Great! Finally I get to dream this again.

Since I started working at the Ministry, every once in a while I'd have this dream where Acchan played FL2, a game that I never managed to play myself.

I knew next to nothing about this sequel, and I needed more information in order to avoid its catastrophic endings. All I knew was that the new male characters were Sora, Cyrus, and Dewey, that Katarina was back to interfere with Maria's love, and that the game's happy end would see me thrown into jail, while the bad end would see me dead. I'd meet a sad fate either way. I needed to learn as much as I could in order to escape both of these scenarios.

Acchan put the disc into the console, and the opening sequence started playing on the TV.

Thank you, Acchan, please let me see something useful as you always do, I thought as I stared intently at the screen.

Music played as the twin princes and the count appeared. Apparently, in the sequel, you could also try to get closer with the characters from FL1.

The three familiar faces gave way to those of the new characters: Cyrus, Dewey, and Sora.

This was just a normal intro sequence to an otome game, but seeing the people I knew so well on the TV screen felt kind of weird. Acchan was the type to skip the opening after seeing it just once, but today she was busy opening a bag of chips.

Chips... I wonder when the last time I had chips was... They look so tasty... No! I have to concentrate on the game!

After showing the characters, the opening movie switched to some still images from the game.

Oh, this must be the scene where you find out about Cyrus's field. This one shows Dewey, but I don't think I've ever seen it. Maybe I will in the future. Ah, this one with Sora near the sea looks familiar. Right, it's Ocean Harbor. So that was an event in the game too. Wait, does this mean that I took Maria's place in the event? There I go again, playing the villainess...

After those images, the screen showed two silhouettes with question marks in place of names. I remembered seeing something similar in the first game as a hint toward hidden characters. I hadn't actually cleared FL1 one hundred percent, so I was very surprised when, post-reincarnation, I found out that Raphael was one of the hidden characters.

So there are hidden characters in the sequel too. There are two silhouettes, so it must be two of them. Good to know... No! That's not good! Why am I so calm?! I need to know who they are! What if they're somehow related to my doom?! Raphael's bad end was the most

catastrophic one... What about this time?! Tell me, Acchan, please!

Acchan, as if my thoughts had reached her, took the controller in her hands. “Just a bit more and I’ll have cleared the hidden characters’ routes!” she exclaimed.

Perfect timing! Now I’ll be able to see who the hidden characters are. Thank you, Acchan!

She chose the “Load” option on the screen and started playing the game.

“I’ll always protect you, Maria,” said the character on the screen.

I noticed that Acchan had left the protagonist’s name to the default of “Maria,” but, more importantly, I noticed that the character speaking so romantically to her was someone I knew very well!

Why is he *here?! Is it just someone who looks like him?!* I thought, but the name above the dialogue box on the screen left no room for doubt. That was Cezar Dahl. *Cezar is a romanceable option?! But he doesn’t even live in the same country as Maria! Oh, right, maybe he was supposed to get to know her during the International Assembly! And he was at Ocean Harbor, too, so it could make sense that he knows her. Not that I’ve ever seen the two of them talking.*

As I kept thinking about this, Acchan went on playing.

“Your Highness, I don’t want to have you protect me all the time. I want to protect those close to me as well!” Maria, in the game, declared. This was the same Maria that I knew in person. She was a compassionate girl, but she wasn’t just a damsel in distress.

“I guess you’re that kind of girl. In that case, should it become necessary, we’ll fight side by side,” Cezar replied with a smile, showing his pointy teeth. I nodded in agreement. Maria was *definitely* that kind of girl.

All of a sudden, the screen got darker and scary music started playing.

“Finally we meet. I have been looking for you,” spoke the figure of a woman hiding her face under a hood. The name just showed up as a series of question marks.

“Who are you?” Maria asked.

Cezar shouted, “Show yourself!” Both of them looked positively scared.

They didn’t know who the mystery woman was, but, thanks to my past dreams and the note about the game, I did. I knew her very

well.

"Now, now. The same cannot be said for that young man, but surely Maria has met me enough times to remember me," the woman told them.

"I do not understand... Who are you?" Maria, taken aback with fear, wondered.

"I must say, it is most impolite of you to forget me," the woman grumbled as she removed the hood from her face, showing herself to Maria.

Maria was dumbstruck for a moment, then shouted, "Lady Katarina Claes!"

"It has been a while, Maria Campbell," Katarina replied with a grin and evil stare befitting a villainess.

"I thought you had left the kingdom... Why are you here?"

"I was exiled, yes. And because of you, at that. But now, I am back!"

Don't! Don't come back! I screamed at my counterpart inside the screen. *Just stay there in Xiarmah and live as a peasant farmer! You'd be able to eat rice every day without worrying about doom!*

Of course, FL's Katarina couldn't hear me.

"I have come back," she paused to cackle, "for revenge!" Her evil grin grew wider.

Cezar stepped in front of Maria, as if to shield her.

"This girl is mine. I won't let you touch her," he proclaimed.

"You fool. Do you really believe that you stand a chance against Katarina Claes and her Dark Magic? Heed my call, Cerberus!" Katarina shouted, and a huge wolf jumped out of her shadow.

Cerberus... Is that Pochi?!

"Okay, now I just have to defeat Katarina and bring her to the authorities, and the route will be complete!" I heard Acchan say.

What?! Katarina is going to be defeated?! And...

"What kind of stupid name is Cerberus anyway?!" I screamed as I woke up to the faces of three beautiful girls staring at me.

"Lady Katarina... Are you all right?" Maria, worried by my sudden outburst, inquired.

"I, uh, yes! I'm fine!" I was still confused, having just woken up from the dream, but seeing my friends' faces had calmed me down a bit.

"What happened just now?" Sophia wondered, confused.

“And what did you mean by ‘Cerberus’?” Mary added, perplexed.

“Oh, I just had a weird dream. I didn’t really mean anything in particular! Hahaha…” I tried to laugh it off since I certainly couldn’t tell them about what I’d just seen, nor could I come up with any believable excuse.

Both of them kept staring at me questioningly. I realized that my best bet was to change the subject.

“Anyway, what are you two doing here?” I asked. Neither Sophia nor Mary worked at the Ministry (to be honest, it was rare for any noble lady to work at the Ministry), so it was weird to see them here.

“Lady Mary and I are both here to help today. We just wanted to pass by and say hello to you,” Sophia replied, unfazed by the sudden change in topic, “but then we heard that you were sleeping, so we decided to wait for you to wake up.”

“Oh, I see, so that’s why you were here,” I replied, relieved that I’d managed to steer the conversation away from my scream.

Both Sophia and Mary sometimes came to the Ministry to help however they could when they had free time. They said that they did that to broaden their horizons and improve as ladies. For someone like me, who preferred to spend her free time sleeping, that was unbelievable. I had so much respect for them.

“I’m sorry I was asleep! I didn’t know you’d come,” I blurted out.

“Not at all,” replied Mary with a smile. “I’m actually happy that I could see your sleeping face for the first time in so long.”

Sophia nodded in agreement while she smiled as well. They were probably saying that just so that I wouldn’t feel bad. They always were so kind, my friends.

“And are you done helping out for today?” I asked.

“Yes, although all we did was help sort some documents. We are ready to go back home now,” Sophia answered.

“Aw, going home already? You know, back at the academy, when we lived in the dormitory, we were always together, but lately it’s been so hard to meet each other,” I remarked. I knew that it was an unavoidable part of growing up, but, “It’s a bit sad, isn’t it?”

“I’ll wait until you’re done with work! I’ll even spend the night with you! I’d love to!” Mary proclaimed, suddenly enthusiastic.

“I-I couldn’t ask you to, you know,” I replied to my friend’s uncomfortably passionate offer.

“Please calm down, Lady Mary. Lady Katarina seems taken aback by your fervor. And did you not say that you had important matters to attend to later in the evening?” Sophia commented, pulling Mary further back from me.

“Ugh, I almost forgot about that. It’s just that no matter in the world is as important as Lady Katarina...” Mary grumbled, puffing up her cheeks in discontent.

For all her reputation as the perfect model of an elegant lady, Mary, when she was with us, could act a bit childish sometimes. But knowing that she did that because we were all so close made me happy.

“To tell the truth, we were discussing the same issue moments earlier. We, too, are saddened that the time we can spend with you has become so scarce. Spending the rest of the night with you today is not a realistic proposition, but we would love to get together with you on your next day of rest from work,” Sophia explained as the sadness showed through her lowered brow.

Hearing that Sophia felt the same way simply added to my joy.

“Of course! Let’s all meet!” I declared, excited at the idea of being able to play with my friends on my next day off.

The three of us and Maria agreed to have a tea party the next time that we all had a day off, and if we had consecutive days off, to have a sleepover. It was then time for Mary to attend to her business, which turned out to be helping Alan with preparing for a concert.

Go to your fiancé, Mary! That’s way more important than me! I thought as I saw my two friends off. Just after they left, Larna came back, bringing Cyrus with her.

Cyrus was as coolly handsome as always, as one would expect of the director of the Magic Powers Department, the most respected department of the whole Ministry. Incidentally, he also was one of FL2’s romanceable options. Despite his good looks and aloof attitude, however, he was actually a pure-hearted country bumpkin who was scared of talking with girls. He even happened to be my secret farming mentor.

He stood before us and spoke gravely. “Katarina Claes, I would like to thank you for your excellent work deciphering the Dark Covenant. I am here to request your cooperation in an additional

task. I would like you to study Dark Magic."

"Study Dark Magic?! Really?!"

"Yes. Thanks to the findings of your colleague Maria, we now know that it is impossible to relay the content of the covenants to other people. In order to further progress our research, we would like you to become able to use Dark Magic yourself in some capacity. This would, of course, only be to an extent where no one would be at risk of harm. Would you help us?" he asked, confirming the suspicion I'd had since Maria explained about how only the owner of the covenant can learn its spells.

I already have enough trouble deciphering the stuff, and now learning actual Dark Magic? That'd be even worse. But, as a Ministry employee, I can't refuse a request from a superior. I stared silently for a moment.

"I will," I begrudgingly assented.

Maybe other people couldn't tell, but I'd spent enough time in the field with Cyrus to tell that his expression had changed ever so slightly, showing that he was sorry for imposing this new ordeal on me.

Larna, on the other hand, sounded almost giddy as she requested, "Try it out on me as soon as you're able to use it!"

I personally thought that using it on her would be a terrible idea, but I had to admit that her love for magic knew no bounds.

"But who'll teach me?" I asked, pouting.

"That's obvious!" Larna replied, surprised that I would even ask. "There's only one other person who can use Dark Magic in the Ministry right now. You're going to learn from him."

"Oh! That's right!"

Unlike other types of magic, Dark Magic was not something that one was born with. It could only be obtained through a gruesome, forbidden ritual, and, as a result, Wielders of Darkness were few and far between. Raphael, who graduated the Academy one year earlier than me, used to wield it, but now he'd lost that power.

The only two people in the Ministry who could still use Dark Magic were me, who'd obtained that power completely by accident, and Sora, who was hired by Sorcié nobles and forced to undergo the human sacrifice ritual. Of course he was the only one who could teach me. Guided by Larna and Cyrus, I went to see Sora, my colleague, fellow Dark Magic wielder, and romanceable character

from FL2.

He was waiting for me in a room specially prepared for me to learn Dark Magic.

"Thank you for teaching me," I told him as I stepped inside.

"My pleasure," he answered, slightly lowering his brow. I could tell that he was acting as polite as he could because Cyrus was there.

"The laws of this kingdom forbid the use of Dark Magic," Cyrus explained, "so remember that what you are doing here is exclusively for research purposes as a member of the Magical Tool Laboratory. Most importantly, you shall never use it outside of here unless you have a very, very, *very* good reason. Now, sorry, but I have a lot of work waiting for me. I will come check in on the two of you later."

He left the room, hurrying to whatever other tasks he had to attend to. Not only was he a department director, but he also had some administrative duties in the Ministry, which is why he was always busy. The fact that he found enough time to keep a field was more impressive than any magic power. *I should learn from him.*

"Okay then, Sora. Ready to teach some magic?"

This question wasn't asked by me, but by Larna. She looked very excited at the idea, but she was as much of a department director as Cyrus and, in theory, should have been just as busy.

"Excuse me, Miss Larna, but...is it okay for you to be here?" I wondered.

"Don't worry! My talented subordinates are taking care of all of my work," she replied with a smile.

For a second, I pictured her talented subordinates working to exhaustion, dark circles under their dead blank eyes. That wasn't the least bit pleasant, but I knew that convincing Larna to leave would be impossible if she was so enthusiastic about it. In my heart, I apologized to all my colleagues.

"Might as well start then," Sora declared. Now that Cyrus was gone and it was all Magical Tool Laboratory department members in the room, he'd gone back to his usual informal tone. Larna was our superior, of course, but she didn't really care about that kind of thing.

"Please do!" she eagerly responded (again, *her* instead of me).

"You see, when you're using Dark Magic, you have to

concentrate it in your hand, like *buzzzz*, and then let it go like *whoosh*, all at once," he explained, putting out his right hand.

I assumed that I was supposed to follow his instructions, but... "Sorry, Sora, I have *no* idea what you mean," I grumbled. I'll admit that I wasn't particularly smart, but being told to make magic go *buzzzz* and *whoosh* made absolutely no sense to me.

"Hmm, this is the first time I've ever thought about how to teach anyone to use magic..." Sora mused, scratching his head as he thought of a solution.

Most magic wielders in the world belonged to Sorcié's noble families. Exceptions were very rare, but existed. Sora happened to be one of them. When a child from our kingdom first used magic, their ability to do so was reported to the Academy of Magic, which the child would then have to attend for two years as soon as he or she turned fifteen.

Sora, however, not being from Sorcié, never went to the academy. Moreover, he hadn't known any other magic users as he grew up. He learned how to use Fire Magic completely on his own.

"How did you learn how to use Dark Magic?" Larna asked him.

"When they forced that magic into me, they just told me to use it. I didn't know how to do it, but they insisted so much that I just tried doing it the same way as I did for Fire Magic, just to shut them up. And that worked," came his wishy-washy response.

"Well then, why don't you try doing it as if you were using Earth Magic?" Larna told me.

I cocked my head to the side, concerned.

"When I use Earth Magic I focus on the earth, like *ziiip*, then I release it like *kaplow,*" I explained.

"That should work. Instead of the earth, just concentrate on, say, those papers over there and then just go *ziiip* and *kaplow*. Maybe that'll work," Larna suggested casually.

I tried it out, just in case, but unfortunately, nothing happened. I even tried taking a better look at the papers to see if they had changed in any way, but no. Nothing.

"It isn't working..."

"I knew it'd end up being hard. How do you even switch between Dark Magic and other kinds of magic?" Larna addressed Sora.

"Oh, when I want to use Fire Magic I go *whoosh,* and when I want to use Dark Magic I go *whoosh*," he replied.

Those sound like the exact same thing to me...

"Knowing how they sound doesn't really help," Larna, who had probably thought the same, pointed out. "Can't you explain it in more detail?"

"I'm sorry, but I've never actually explained it to anyone... How do you use Wind Magic, Larna?" Sora asked back.

She thought for a while before eventually replying. "I kind of make it go *swish."*

"That's just as useless!" I shouted, unable to contain myself.

"But your explanation was also just a list of sounds," Larna countered, albeit with a slightly awkward expression on her face.

She's right! I thought, and the expression on my face turned awkward as well.

"Let's just agree we three aren't the best teachers in the world..." Larna correctly commented.

I'd never even used magic that much in my life to begin with. I could barely do anything with it. Larna was slightly better, but she was self-taught. Indeed, none of us was in a position to explain magic to anyone else. *We need someone who has a more logical, systematic understanding of magic,* I thought, and just as I did so, we heard someone knock on the door.

"Come in," Larna called, and the door squeaked open.

"I've looked all over the Ministry for you, Miss Larna. I need your signature on this document," said Raphael, looking dreadfully tired as he stepped into the room. As vice-director of the Magical Tool Laboratory, he was in charge of covering for Larna when she wasn't in the office, and since that was the case most of the time, he was constantly exhausted.

"Oh, sure..." But then she started silently staring at him.

Raphael's expression grew more and more worried.

"Someone who knows Dark Magic and is good at teaching people! Here he is!" Larna burst out excitedly, looking at Raphael's even more worried face.

"And so I need you to teach Dark Magic to Lady Katarina, Raphael," Larna concluded her explanation of what had brought us to this point.

Raphael pondered for a while before replying. "Well," he finally spoke, "I, too, am self-taught, and therefore I do not know how well I will be able to teach her. If, knowing that, you still wish me to do so, I will accept. However..."

“However...?” Larna echoed, curious about what he was going to say.

“I will be able to spend less time in the office, meaning that I will not be able to cover for you. You will actually need to work like you are supposed to. Is this fine by you?”

“Tsk,” Larna replied, saddened. “I was looking forward to seeing Dark Magic and asking about it...but I have no choice. The higher-ups ordered that she must learn Dark Magic, so that’s our top priority... Still, after you’re all done, I want to see it.”

Larna and Raphael had reached an agreement, but since the work day was almost over and Raphael still had some work left to do in the office, we decided that he would give me my first lesson on the following day. He departed the room, dragging Larna with him, and I was left with Sora, who saw me off to the carriage that had come to get me at the gates.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t really teach you anything,” he apologized as we walked together.

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t be able to teach magic to anyone either. I think it’s a talent that only some people have,” I told him.

“Yeah, me too. And I definitely don’t like teaching in the first place. I mean, I never liked being taught either.”

“What?! You don’t?!” I asked, surprised that someone as talented and resourceful as Sora didn’t like having things be taught to him.

“I mean, I’m all for learning stuff that I care about. But if it’s something that I couldn’t care less about, I just won’t bother.”

“I’m exactly the same! My teachers would always say that to me!” I exclaimed, happy to unexpectedly find that I had something in common with a person who I had assumed could do just about anything.

“Ha ha ha, I can imagine. The person who used to teach me scolded me all the time too.”

“What person?”

“Back when I lived in the slums, there was this adult who taught me how to read and do math,” he replied, and I remembered that Sora grew up as an orphan in Ethenell’s slums. The fact that he was so talented despite never going to school just made it that much more impressive.

“I see. What kind of person were they?” I asked him, seeing the sparkle of nostalgia that had illuminated his eyes.

“The weirdest adult ever! You could never tell what that nutcase was going to do next. When I was a kid, I thought that maybe that was because he was from a different country than mine, but even after growing up and traveling the world, I never found anyone like him,” he replied, sounding like he was having a lot of fun reminiscing about that. I could even see a hint of a smile on his face.

“You must really love him,” I told him, and he looked at me in surprise. That was so unexpected that I gave him the same look back. Sora was less self-aware than I’d thought. “C’mon! It’s written all over your face!” I added with a laugh.

After thinking it over, he agreed, “I guess you’re right,” in a flat tone. Then he mumbled something else under his breath. “How can you be so dense when it comes to romance and then read people so well at times like this...?”

“Hmm? What did you say? I couldn’t quite hear you.”

“Nothing,” he answered, and started ruffling my hair while I squealed for him to stop. “Now that I think of it...you remind me of that person from back then,” he continued, laughing to himself.

“Is it the villainous face?” I asked, confused.

“What does that even mean? But no, it’s not the face. Just your behavior in general.”

“How so?”

“You’re both so weird.”

“Hmm? I think I’m pretty normal...” I dissented. I was a high-ranking noble, sure, but other than that I was just an ordinary girl.

He looked at me as if he had problems with what I’d just said, but I remained convinced. If it wasn’t for this evil-looking face, I’d be the definition of an average girl.

“You know,” I told him, “I was surprised to hear that you don’t like studying or being taught, but I guess that I can imagine you not paying any attention to things you aren’t interested in.” In the back of my mind, I envisioned a younger Sora sleeping through a boring lesson. “By the way, how old were you when you learned how to read and write?” I asked, trying to better define the scene I was picturing in my head.

“Who knows? I was an orphan for as long as I can remember, so I have no idea about my actual age,” he replied.

“Really?! So you don’t even know your birthday?!”

I knew that he was born in the slums, but I had assumed that he

somehow knew *when* he was born.

"Exactly. No idea," he casually responded.

"But then, when do you celebrate?" I asked him, more curious than ever.

"Celebrate what?"

"Your birthday, of course!"

"Oh, right, I guess some people do celebrate that," he said, uninterested, but to me that was a crucial issue.

"Aw... But I wanted to celebrate your birthday, since you've done so much for me up to now." I would have liked to set up a huge surprise party for him, but I couldn't have imagined that he didn't even know his birthday.

"No need to do anything like that."

"I've got it! If you don't know your birthday, you can just make one up!"

He gaped at me in confusion. "Huh?"

"So, when should it be? What's a date you like?" My enthusiasm seemed to just confuse him all the more.

"No, really, I..." he sputtered, but seeing that I wouldn't step down, he eventually conceded, "I don't know. Pick one for me, won't you?"

"What? Me?" I gaped. "Okay then... Let's make it the day that the two of us first met! It was during the school festival last year, around the end of September. The day was...er..."

"The twenty-fifth." Sora still sounded disinterested, but I was really happy that he remembered that day.

"Perfect! Then your birthday will be September 25! It's not that far away! And when it comes around, expect a nice celebration!" I announced with a smile, but he evaded my gaze and started ruffling my hair once more.

Not again! I thought, but the happiness of being able to celebrate Sora's birthday won over the mild annoyance of having him mess up my hair. After walking and chatting like that, we eventually reached the Ministry's gates, where the carriage was waiting for me. As I started riding home, I saw Sora's face tinged completely red by the sunset.

On the trip back, I was finally able to get some rest after a long day of work. I was tired, but I was also glad that Sora now had a birthday that we could celebrate. I spent some time excitedly daydreaming about the various ways that I could surprise him come

September 25th, but I eventually remembered that I had a much more pressing issue at hand: Dark Magic.

The next day, Raphael would start teaching me how to use Dark Magic spells, and I had to concentrate on that. This wouldn't be the first time that Raphael had taught me something, since he had also helped me prepare for tests back at the academy. His explanations back then were always detailed and easy to understand, so I imagined that my lessons on the next day would not involve any *whoosh*ing or *kaplow*ing.

But I was also afraid that learning Dark Magic would take me one step closer to being a villainess. Not having played FL2, I had no idea how things were supposed to work out in the game. I needed more information about it...

Of course! That dream I had earlier!

Right after waking up I spoke to Mary and Sophia for the first time in a while, and then Larna and Cyrus told me that I had to take Dark Magic lessons. I was so preoccupied by those things that I'd almost forgotten about my dream. *Why am I like this?* I thought, saddened by my constant lack of concentration, and then started recalling all I could about what I'd seen during my short nap.

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

"Let the meeting begin. Today, we shall discuss the information obtained from our latest dream."

"Yes, ma'am. I was very surprised to learn that Pochi's real name was supposed to be Cerberus!"

"A name like that doesn't fit that cute little puppy, does it? He doesn't look like a Cerberus to me."

"I agree, but this is not relevant at the present time. Please try to discuss things that could actually be helpful to us."

"Well, since Acchan was so busy eating her chips, we were able to see the whole opening sequence for *Fortune Lover II*."

"Those chips looked delicious..."

"They did, but please, let's try to concentrate here. By watching the opening sequence, we were able to ascertain that this time there are supposed to be two hidden characters in the game!"

"And one of them is Cezar, the Prince of Ethenell who became friends with Katarina!"

“Who would have thought that?”

“The first time we met him, I thought that he was just as handsome as the romanceable characters in the game... Turns out that there was a good reason for that.”

“There was no ruggedly handsome character for Maria to choose so far, so maybe that’s why they added him in.”

“That could be. If so, we could theorize that the other hidden character also fits an archetype that wasn’t present in the previous game. Who could that be?”

“We have already met Cezar. Do you think that we have already met the other hidden character too?”

“That is indeed likely.”

“Could he be someone from the Ministry?”

“Hmm... If he was, then maybe he’d be someone from the Magic Powers Department, since that’s full of cool, talented people.”

“But Cyrus and Dewey are already there. Wouldn’t that be too many just in one place?”

“Then could it be the Magical Tool Laboratory? But the people there are just...weird.”

“But that narcissistic guy is kind of handsome in his own right.”

“‘Kind of’ won’t cut it. All the other romanceable characters are *totally* handsome!”

“Sure, but think about our department colleagues for a second. There are people with tons of makeup, people who hide their face behind their hair, and people who’re covering their faces under a hood. Even the department director is a master of disguise. We know nothing about how any of these people actually look! Maybe some of them are actually much more handsome than we imagine. Even the one who’s always wearing the tank top, who knows?”

“That would give us a lot of options, but currently we cannot even assume that this character is someone working at the Ministry to begin with.”

“Where would Maria meet them? Since we already know Cezar, we probably already know about the other one too.”

“Maybe he has already met Maria, but not Katarina.”

“I see... That could be true as well. That’d leave us completely in the dark.”

“In that case, our best possible course of action is to ask Maria for more information. In any case, are you two not forgetting about

the other important thing which we have learned today?"

"Huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Remember what Acchan said! 'I just have to defeat Katarina and bring her to the authorities, and the route will be complete.'"

"B-But that means that Katarina is also the antagonist in Cezar's route..."

"Exactly! And the same could be true for the other hidden character too!"

"So we risk being killed or imprisoned if we interfere with the romance between Maria and any of the other new characters?! Any of those five?!"

"But in FL1 Katarina always meddled with Maria when she was going for Jeord or Keith! Did she get promoted as a villainess or something?!"

"That would be one terrible promotion... Anyway, all we know is that we are in danger."

"And we haven't even played FL2, so we don't know what situations to steer clear of and what catastrophic endings to avoid! At least last time we had years to prepare..."

"Wh-What if we became really good at Dark Magic and were able to fight back?"

"Fight back...? You don't mean..."

"I do. I'm sorry for Maria and the others, but we could learn, like, a spell that turns everything dark and then just run away while nobody can see us!"

"Y-You coward! Not even a villainess should ever stoop so low!"

"Say what you want, but I'm going to run away! I'll run and run until I can settle as a farmer in a far away place somewhere!"

"While I cannot say that it is a good plan... At the moment we have no other option. We should at least learn the bare minimum of Dark Magic to allow us to make a quick escape and then go on living as a farmer. We need to practice. Any objections?"

"No ma'am!"

"No ma'am!"

I was so tired from the meeting that I held inside my head that I planned to sleep until I was home, as I usually did... However, unexpectedly, I couldn't sleep.

I remembered my dream, and thought of the things that Maria and Cezar said inside the game, and the way they looked at

Katarina. They weren't even strangers, let alone friends... They were enemies. The fear in Maria's eyes and the anger on Cezar's face filled me with loneliness. I knew that what I saw was just the game as it was normally supposed to play out, but I couldn't help feeling sad.

Furthermore, I was going to start studying Dark Magic. Since the only thing I could do so far was to summon Pochi, and that didn't work all of the time either, I was optimistic that I wouldn't become like the Katarina from FL2... But now I had been ordered to learn how to actually use dark spells, bringing me closer to being an actual villainess.

Some time ago, when I talked to my friends about how I feared being taken over by darkness, they told me that they'd stay by my side no matter what, and they'd stop me if I was going to do something bad. I couldn't have been happier.

But what if I hurt those who stood by my side, or Maria, who wasn't there that time? My kind, hard-working, genuine friends... I didn't want to hurt them. If I became Maria's antagonist, I would end up doing exactly that. I was scared of becoming evil and ending up dead or in prison, of course, but much more than that I was scared of becoming evil and hurting any of them.

Sitting in the carriage by myself, I rolled up in a ball and tightly hugged my own legs.

"Lady Katarina, we have arrived," the coachman announced, and I, still overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, got off of the carriage and entered the mansion.

My mood was so gloomy that my body felt heavy. I wanted to go to bed. *If only this house was smaller... This mansion is so big that getting to my bedroom takes forever...* I thought as I dragged my feet through the hallway.

"Welcome back, Big Sister," Keith greeted me, coming out of the room opposite mine.

I would normally be happy to see him, but today I simply couldn't muster any enthusiasm to properly greet him back.

"Oh. Keith. Hi..." is all I managed to say in a deep, tired voice.

Keith, who knew me so well, obviously immediately noticed my mood. "What is wrong? Are you tired?" he asked worriedly, staring at me. He'd been working with father, going here and there all day long, and I was sure that he must have been pretty tired himself.

Still, he found the energy to worry about me. *What a sweet brother I have...*

"Yes, a bit. Work was really hectic today. But I'm sure that a good night's sleep will fix that," I claimed with my best attempt at a smile.

"No, something's happened to you. Come, tell me all about it," he insisted, pulling me into a nearby room before I could even reply.

He sat me down on a chair, with him facing me.

"So, what happened?" he asked. His blue eyes, staring directly into mine, told me that there was no point in lying. Keith always knew what I was thinking.

"Well... I had a dream. A dream where I used Dark Magic to do bad things to my friends," I explained, ignoring all the details about the game.

"To be honest, I can't even imagine you hurting a fly, but now that I think of it, you already mentioned something similar once before."

"Yeah... Everyone told me that it'd be fine, and I was happy about that... But actually, starting tomorrow, I'll have to learn how to use Dark Magic spells..." I continued, and then I went on to explain how it came to that, and how I was scared that knowing those spells could result in me hurting my friends. He carefully listened to my long explanation with a serious expression on his face.

"I understand. As we told you that time, I plan to—no, *we all* plan to stay by your side, no matter what happens, and we will also make sure that you won't do anything bad. What you are saying is that you are scared that, by staying at your side, that would give you the opportunity to harm us?" he asked me, perfectly summarizing my feelings.

"Yes. I don't want that to happen to any of you," I replied.

"Hmm... You know, I wouldn't mind facing harm because of you, but that would make you sad in turn, wouldn't it...? In that case, I'll make sure that I can fight Dark Magic. Both I and all of the others. If we do that, you won't be able to harm us even if you wanted to. Then, there'll be no problem," he declared, smiling at me.

Keith was almost too kind. When my friends told me that all would be fine, instead of trusting them and forgetting about the

problem, I kept thinking of how things could go wrong, placing the burden on them. Despite that, my brother kept listening to me, doing his best to find a solution. Knowing that he was there for me made me happy...incredibly happy.

"Keith!" I shouted, jumping out of my chair to hug him. Since he was still sitting down, I ended up hugging his head against my chest. "Keith! Thank you so much! I love you, Keith!" I kept shouting, but I know that nothing I said could ever fully express the gratitude I felt for him.

He let me do that for a while, but eventually... "Big Sister... Could you let go of me...?"

I immediately stepped back, noticing that his face had turned bright red. *Oh no! I must have hugged him too hard!*

"I'm so sorry, Keith! I hugged you so hard that you couldn't breathe, didn't I? Don't worry, I'll bring you some water!" I offered, hurrying to the door, but he quickly grabbed my hand and stopped me.

"It's fine. I don't need water," he told me, still completely red in the face.

"B-But...!"

"I could breathe just fine."

"Hmm?"

"Don't worry about it. Now just go get some rest," he ordered, leading me to my bedroom.

I felt sorry for expressing my happiness by hugging him so hard, but on the other hand I still felt immense relief thanks to the things that he'd told me. Every time the memory of that dream popped up in my head, I'd just need to think back to Keith telling me that there would be no problem. Back in the carriage, despite being so tired, I hadn't managed to sleep. But this time, as soon as I hit the bed, my mind immediately switched off and I enjoyed several hours of good, peaceful rest.

★★★★★★

I, Keith Claes, was alone in my room trying to regain some amount of control over my face, which was still ablaze. However, every time I remembered how Katarina's embrace had felt and the words she had whispered in my ear, I could feel the blood rush to my cheeks once again.

Katarina didn't seem to understand that she was a woman, with all that it entailed. If she did, certainly she would think twice before hugging a man against her bosom while telling him that she loves him.

Had it been Jeord instead of me, who knows what he would have done! And honestly, who knows what I *could have done?* I voiced my disdain for my sister's actions inside my heart, shaking my head as if to wash away the feeling of her body against it.

"She has probably already forgotten the confession I made to her... And to think of how much effort that took me," I mumbled to myself with a sigh, saddened by my own words.

During my second year at the academy, I had finally managed to convey to her the feelings I had held on to for many years, but shortly thereafter, the graduation ceremony, the beginning of her work at the Ministry, and all the other related events seemed to have wiped my words straight out of her memory, much to my dismay.

I was at a disadvantage anyway. The only way to make my feelings clear to someone as unfamiliar with and uninterested in romance as Katarina would be to relentlessly make advances on her, just as Jeord did. Unfortunately, I wasn't very comfortable doing that kind of thing.

Currently, however, Katarina must have had bigger things on her mind. Since she had joined the Ministry, she had clearly been worried about something—she was trying to hide it, but it was painfully obvious. I remembered that she had seemed worried in a similar way before starting her time at the academy, so it was possible that her recent woes were of a similar kind. I wished I knew more, but considering how she had dodged my questions, she probably wanted to keep the details for herself.

That being said, looking at her terrified expression was enough to tell how serious she was about being scared of hurting others with Dark Magic. As for me, I couldn't ever imagine Katarina hurting anyone or anything, with Dark Magic or without. I had comforted her about that fact in the past too, but her fear, which must have been truly intense, apparently had not completely subsided. This fear was probably motivated by something that she was hiding from me.

As much as I wished for her to disclose this secret, I wondered whether she ever would. Even now, as she worked for the Ministry, her engagement with Jeord still stood. She was eighteen this year too—old enough to marry. I wanted to be by her side for the rest of my life, but I wasn't sure whether I would be able to. If Katarina did end up marrying Jeord, I would have to marry someone else as the future head of the Claes family.

Mother is opposed to her marriage, saying that she could never be a royal, but I don't know what father thinks. I am too scared to ask him and hear an answer that I might not like.

Thinking of these serious issues had finally made the blushing

subside. My relief, however, was soon interrupted by the sound of knocking on the door.

"Lord Keith, the master has summoned you," I heard a servant say from outside. It was not without a hint of nervousness, given what I was just thinking about, that I left my room and headed toward father's office.

I knocked on the door.

"Father, it's me, Keith."

"Sorry to bother you. Come in," he greeted me in a lively tone. I entered to find him behind his desk, looking at papers.

When I graduated from the academy, father started teaching me about his work, and I soon learned that there was always plenty to do. This was no problem for him though, as he was as sharp in his work as he looked dull when resting. It was no wonder that people held him in such high respect.

"I know it's late, but I have a favor to ask you. I finally received these documents which I'll need to use tomorrow. I've already read through them, but I'd like you to do the same before the end of the day, just in case," he explained, handing me a hefty stack of paper. I was impressed by the fact that he had already read and understood this much material in so little time, and I thought that I had to show myself worthy and do the same.

I started to walk out so that I could carefully read the documents in my room, but father called out to me. "By the way, I heard that you lent your shoulder to Katarina again."

The surprise at learning how he already knew about what had happened hit me at the same time as the fear that he may have also known about how she had hugged me. Father was an intelligent and rational person, but when it came to his wife and daughter he often let his emotions take control.

"I only listened to her worries as she seemed somewhat tired. I have not done much," I carefully responded.

"No, you have. Your support means a lot for Katarina, especially now that she is working. Thank you, Keith," he replied with a smile.

"Incidentally, father, how are you planning to deal with Katarina's engagement?"

The words just slipped out of my mouth! Hearing him talk about Katarina and her work compelled me to ask him that... What if he tells

me that he wants her to marry the prince as soon as possible?

He cocked his head and briefly considered what to say, just as I was contemplating running away before hearing the answer to the question I myself had asked. “I think I will not interfere with her decision, whatever that is. If she wants to cancel the engagement, she is free to do so,” he stated.

I was utterly shocked, as this was the answer I least expected. As much as I didn’t want to, I couldn’t refrain from asking father another question: “But is the engagement to a royal not a very important issue?”

“Not really. The Claes family is in no dire need for that political connection, and the current king, unlike his predecessor, is not the kind of person to hold a grudge over such trivialities.”

“But when Katarina was first engaged to the prince, you seemed to be particularly enthusiastic about that fact,” I observed, aware of how bewildered my expression must have looked.

“Of course,” father answered, failing to notice my confusion, “because your sister seemed to be very fond of him at the time. I would say that those feelings look as if they have faded over time however.” That reasoning was so typical of him that I was almost disappointed at myself for worrying.

“Still, I worry that canceling the engagement would hurt her reputation,” I added, not sure why I would ever say something like that despite how much I wanted for her to be released from Jeord. I must have been so surprised by father’s nonchalance that I started speaking the opinion of the masses.

“That makes sense, yes, but nowadays canceling an old engagement to marry for love is not that uncommon anymore. The king’s marriage was not a political one either. And then there is the chancellor... That story has been almost forgotten, but he married a woman who was already engaged to someone else. It was quite the scandal back then,” he revealed.

I had met the chancellor, Nicol’s father, a few times, but he always struck me as a meek, calm person. I couldn’t imagine him stealing another man’s fiancée.

“And, well, that applies to me too. I am bound to someone I love, and I wish the same for my daughter,” he concluded, smiling. After worrying for so many years about what his plans were for Katarina’s marriage, hearing his casual answer had left me dumbfounded. Father then looked me in the eye and spoke again.

“And for my son too of course.”

Somehow, his words set my heart aflame. It had now been close to ten years since I had first become part of the Claes family, and this household had made me happier than I could ever have expected. During all that time, not once had I been pressured into finding a spouse for political reasons.

“Thank you, father,” I responded, ready to leave with my heart finally at peace.

“Oh, just so you know,” he stopped me, “whoever Katarina falls in love with, he will have my blessing. You have nothing to worry about.” He waved his hand, showing me a mischievous grin.

I left, hardly believing what I had just heard.

If I am to take that at face value, he knows of my feelings for her. Sure, I kind of expected that someone as smart as he would figure it out, unlike Katarina and mother, who are…not as smart. But hearing it like that, from his own mouth, makes me nervous. Then again, that also means that I don’t need to give up on her.

So far, I had assumed that Katarina, forced to go through with her engagement, was eventually going to marry Jeord, and that all I could do was to come to terms with that reality. After voicing my questions to father, however, I came to believe that there still was a chance to make her my wife, as long as I could win her heart over. After imagining that happiest of futures, the one where she stood by my side, I couldn’t give up anymore even if I wanted to.

And I will not give up, I thought, feeling my lips curl into a smile.

Work was waiting for me the next day, but I already knew that my brain would not let me get any sleep until morning.

Chapter 2: Learning Dark Magic

Yesterday, on my way home, I was so worried I couldn't even take my usual nap on the carriage. After talking with Keith, though, I felt so relieved that I slept like a baby until Anne came to wake me up. After getting out of bed and into the hallway, I saw Keith.

"Good morning, Keith! Thank you for yesterday," I said, walking toward him.

"Oh, Big Sister, good morning," he replied, but, when he turned around to face me, I noticed two big dark circles under his eyes.

"Keith, what's wrong?! Did you stay up all night because of what I told you last night?!" Maybe talking about my fears made him worried too.

"No, don't worry. I was awake till morning, yes, but it had nothing to do with you," he assured me, shaking his head.

I was relieved that at least it wasn't my fault, but this didn't change the fact that he'd been up all night. "But you still had something that worried you so much that you couldn't sleep, right? When you let me vent to you yesterday, that helped a lot, so I'll do the same with you! I can't do much more than listen to you, but I'll do my best." I proudly beat my fist against my chest.

"Hmm... I'm not worried about anything though. Actually, I couldn't sleep because of how happy I was. So, really, I'm fine." He giggled.

Oh, kind of like a kid on the day before a school trip?

"What made you so happy?" I asked, curious.

"Isn't it about time you go to work? You'd better hurry up, or you'll be late." Keith ignored my question as he pushed me toward the entrance. "See you later, Big Sister," he added, leaving me no time to speak before he closed the door behind me with a terribly sensual smile on his face.

Seeing Keith show an expression so sexy that you'd think he belonged to an M-rated game—and seeing it first thing in the morning, no less—left me totally confused. He must have been *very* happy. Thankfully, I had built enough of a resistance to handsome

guys doing handsome things that, halfway through the carriage trip to the Ministry, I finally got my cool back.

I can't space out like this! I have to concentrate! I'm going to learn Dark Magic today!

Unable to focus, I thought of Keith again. He wasn't the playboy type, but he was just as attractive as all the other romanceable options in *Fortune Lover*. In the past few years, in particular, he had bloomed into a man so attractive as to remind me of Nicol.

I can't have Alluring Count Number 2 living in my house. I'll have to tell Keith to tone the sexy down a bit.

I eventually reached the Ministry, got off the carriage, thanked the coachman, and headed to the Magical Tool Laboratory office. As soon as I opened the door, Larna greeted me.

"Good morning, Lady Katarina. I reserved the same room as yesterday for you. Go and learn to your heart's content!"

I noticed that she had something around her ankle. A better look revealed that it was a chain with its other end connected to her desk.

What exactly is this...?

"Excuse me, Miss Larna... What is that on your ankle?"

"Oh, this? It's made of a special metal that's very strong but also very light, so that it doesn't interfere with my work. We'd built it for Nathan, but today, since Raphael isn't here, they put it on me so that I don't get away and leave them with all the work! Ha ha ha!" she replied with a hearty laugh, although to me it sounded like no laughing matter.

I could understand why they'd want to put a chain on Nathan, as he had the incredible ability of getting lost within seconds, causing everyone in the department lots of trouble. But Larna? The department's director? The other employees had so little trust in her that, despite the chain, I could see them occasionally taking their eyes off their desks to check on their boss. They really had it hard.

"Give this document to Larna, and this one over here too. As for this one..." Raphael was giving orders left and right. Today, instead of working in the office as usual, he would be teaching me Dark Magic.

He was the department's vice-director, but I thought that nobody would complain about having him as the director.

"I will be leaving now. Let me know if you need me for anything," he concluded, before turning around to approach me.

“Shall we go?” he asked.

“Yes!” I replied, and we headed to the room that Larna had arranged for us.

“It’s been a while since we last met like this, Lady Katarina,” Raphael told me while we were walking together.

“Yes, quite a while...” I said, noticing the woman passing by and staring in awe at Raphael’s calm, handsome smile. Speaking of handsome, Raphael, with his red hair and gray eyes, was a secret romanceable character in FL1.

He had to be in disguise most of the time, but even his fake, not-as-flashy appearance didn’t change the fact that he was very popular within the Ministry, mainly because of his calm and understanding personality and his skill with work. He, too, sometimes showed hints of sexiness in his facial expressions that made the girls around him swoon.

In general though, he was so busy with work that he always looked tired, and he was mostly hidden behind stacks of documents anyway. Maybe life at the Ministry was easier for him than it was back at the academy, where he was ridiculously popular. After he left the academy because of the incident he was involved in, we somehow ended up working together, but he had so much to do (mostly because of Larna) that I could never spend time with him.

Doing something together after so long makes me feel like I’m back at the academy, I happily thought to myself. He also used to help me study back there, where he was the kind and reliable student council president.

“By the way,” I spoke up, “since today you’re the teacher and I’m the student, you don’t need to call me ‘Lady.’” Even though he was my superior at work, he always spoke very politely to me, but having him do the same today would feel too weird.

He looked surprised at first, but then he smiled and told me, “Okay then, Katarina.”

No wonder he was so popular.

“I am going to explain the basics of Dark Magic to you, but I also made some notes so that you can refer to them after we’re done,” he continued, handing me some papers covered in his beautiful handwriting clearly detailing all that one would need to study the topic.

Raphael was born to be a teacher! What a difference from yesterday’s swishes and whooshes...

“Thank you, Mister Raphael!” I rejoiced, deciding that he was worthy of being addressed like a real teacher.

“I think that’s going overboard...” he muttered, looking bitterly amused. Judging from his reaction, I thought that I’d better cut the ‘Mister.’

And so, my first proper Dark Magic lesson finally started.

“Now, let me explain,” Raphael began.

“Yes!”

At first, he explained about the most basic stuff, like how one obtains Dark Magic powers, which was something I already knew. One had to sacrifice a human life and perform a ritual with some sort of magic circle. Remembering Raphael’s tragic story about that very ritual made me sad, but he went on explaining completely unfazed.

“What we know about how to obtain Dark Magic powers, we have learned from investigating the Dieke mansion and Sora’s case. You’re the first person who did it by finding a Dark Familiar instead. So, please understand that you may not be able to use your powers in the same way as Sora and I,” he cautioned.

“Of course.”

Of course indeed. Even Larna had told me the same thing before. I didn’t know how it happened in the game’s actual plot, but in my case I had stumbled upon Dark Magic without meaning to do it, and certainly hadn’t performed any ritual. I just met the Dark Familiar (Pochi) who belonged to Sarah, a mysterious woman who wielded Dark Magic, and he started living in my shadow.

“Good. Now I am going to tell you how I actually used Dark Magic.”

“Yes!” I answered, and he looked at me with a pleased smile.

“How do you normally use your powers, Katarina?” he asked me.

“You mean Earth Magic? I just go *ziiip*, and then kind of *kaplow*!”

Wait, this is the same useless explanation I gave yesterday... A list of sounds.

Raphael, however, didn’t get mad at me at all. “I see... And do you feel like you are doing that with your body? Or is it a tool or something?” he inquired. Larna and Sora had asked me nothing of the sort.

I’d never really thought about it before, but... “I think it’s my

body."

"That's good," he replied, relieved. "That is how I do it too. I consider magic powers like extra limbs. Some of the teachers at the academy also used similar comparisons, saying that using magic is not much different from moving your body. I believe that this holds true for most people."

I was impressed by how much intelligent students were able to learn from lessons at the academy. I mostly just nodded along and forgot anything I was told within minutes.

"But, when I use Dark Magic," Raphael continued, "it's a bit different. It's like using my hands and feet to control a tool."

"How so?"

"Imagine using a pen to write, or scissors to cut paper."

"Oh..." I gasped, in awe at how much clearer his explanation was than everything I had heard on the previous day. *That's Raphael for you...*

"You cannot use Dark Magic as you would your other powers. I try to concentrate on an imaginary tool, thinking of using it to cast my spells. In my case, specifically, it was a lantern. Try to do the same," he instructed.

Given that my current level of understanding was "Concentrate it in your hand, like *buzzzz*, and then let it go like *whoosh,*" I really needed this practical advice. The way that Raphael had put it was clear and easy to understand, if a bit surprising.

"Does it need to be any specific tool?"

"Not necessarily. But it must be something that you feel could help you cast Dark Magic."

"Why is yours a lantern anyway?" I asked him.

"Hmm, no reason in particular." I could tell from his expression that he didn't want to talk about it, and I didn't investigate any further. I had heard part of his story directly from him, but I was sure that there were a lot of terrible things about it that I didn't know about. It was incredible that he still had the strength to smile like that while talking about Dark Magic.

I wish I was half as incredible as him... I guess I have to start with learning how to use Dark Magic. But what kind of tool should I use? In my old world, the first thing you'd think of when talking about magic tools would be a flying broom, but that doesn't really apply in this world. Hmm, what about a wand? That sounds pretty magical.

I visualized a shiny, sparkling wand with a star on the tip, like

the ones that anime heroines used, but then I realized that it looked way out of place. We were talking about Dark Magic here, with my Dark Familiar being a black dog who was able to turn into a huge wolf. What I needed was a black, creepy wand, like the one a villain would use. Instead of the star, it needed a skull on the tip.

"Okay! I got it!" I announced after visualizing the new dark wand.

"Very good. Now try to think of it as if it were right in front of your eyes."

"All right," I agreed, imagining the wand, in all its details, in front of my eyes. Suddenly, I heard a *whoosh* noise and something, too dark to distinguish, jumped out of my shadow and right into my hand. "H-Huh?!" I looked to my hand, and there it was: the wand I was thinking about, skull and all. "I-Is this...real?" I mumbled to myself, and noticed that Raphael, too, was staring at my hand.

"Wh-What...?!" he asked, before going speechless. After a while, he asked, "Is this the tool you were thinking about?" looking dead serious.

I nodded, still shocked, and he put a hand to his forehead.

"You have a Dark Familiar, and that makes you different from us other Dark Magic users... I knew that much. But this... This I didn't expect. The tool you imagined has actually materialized," he continued, without for a second taking his eyes off the wand. "I wonder if I can touch it too..."

"Go ahead," I offered, handing it over to him.

"It seems that I can. But why? What is this even made of?"

Feeling a bit less nervous now that I didn't have the wand in my hands anymore, I looked at it again. Between the skull, the color, and its general appearance, it looked very scary.

Ugh, I knew it. I should have gone with the cute one. This is going to make me look even more like a villainess!

"Thank you," Raphael said, giving the wand back to me. "I would like to learn more about it. Will you help me?"

I nodded again. I remembered being told the same thing about Pochi—when dealing with mysterious stuff, it was important to learn as much as possible about it.

Raphael gave me a series of instructions, like trying to materialize other objects or to make the wand disappear. I found out that the skull wand was the only thing I could materialize, maybe because its image had been burned into my mind. However,

I could put it back into my shadow and take it out at will.

"I see. You can take it out of your shadow and put it back in as many times as you want, but you cannot produce any other object. I'll have to report to Miss Larna..." Raphael mused as he took notes. "Your powers are really different from ours," he added, looking slightly worried, "so you should be careful. Do you feel all right?"

After making a new discovery like this, Larna would have started going forward with experiments and tests without worrying about anything, but Raphael was coolheaded enough to remain calm. This was another reason why most people—including me—liked him and always relied on him.

"Yes! No problem at all," I replied.

"I'm glad." His face showed that he meant it. "Now we can try to see whether this tool allows you to use Dark Magic."

"Sure. But...how?"

Dark Magic was used to control people's minds. Even if the wand enabled me to do it, I didn't *want* to do something that scary. I nervously clenched a fist in front of my chest.

"Don't worry. I won't have you control people or anything like that," Raphael assured me, guessing what I was thinking. "That's not something to be done lightly anyway." His kind smile relieved me of my fear.

"What do I have to do then?"

"Dark Magic can do more than control people. It can also summon darkness," he explained.

"What does that mean?"

"You literally create darkness in front of your eyes. Since we can see it, it's easy to tell whether you succeeded, and since I've tried it myself, I know that it's safe. It's perfect for training your powers."

"Oh! It's like Dark Magic for dummies!"

"More or less, yes," Raphael giggled. "So, do you want to try?"

"Yes!" I firmly grasped the wand and visualized my magic coming out of it. "Come forth, Darkness!" I shouted, flicking my wrist.

I waited. "Huh?"

Weird. Nothing's happening. Let's try again.

"Come forth, Darkness!"

Nope. Nothing.

"This isn't working..." I told Raphael in disappointment. He

thought for a bit before speaking.

"Maybe you should try to visualize the darkness itself," he suggested. Once again, his instructions were clear and easy to understand.

Got it—I have to visualize darkness. What does darkness look like? Like black paint?

"Raphael... What does darkness look like?" I asked, and he stared at me in surprise before giggling to himself.

"Oh, right, you wouldn't know," he said, still laughing. Seeing a handsome man laughing like that made me blush for some reason.

"Hmm... Would something like black paint work?"

"Not quite. Try to think of, let's see... What about a dark, starless night?"

"Okay!" I answered, positive that I could visualize something so easy.

A dark night, without any stars, moon, or lamps. Pitch black. It's too dark to even sneak into the kitchen to grab a few cookies... Good. I got it. This is the image I need.

"Come forth, Darkness!" I shouted once again, flailing the wand around. "Oh...?"

In front of me, where there used to be nothing, there was now a floating dark dot, smaller than a grape. It was so tiny that I thought I just had something stuck in my eyes, but, even after rubbing on them, the dot remained there.

Is it a bug then?

I tried getting closer, but the dot didn't move, and upon closer inspection it didn't look like a bug at all. Just a dark, featureless circle.

"Is this...Dark Magic?" I mumbled, confused.

"Most likely."

"I was expecting the whole room to turn dark or something... This is a bit underwhelming." What was even the point of summoning this itsy bitsy piece of darkness?

"Hmm..." Raphael pondered the matter, looking particularly distressed. "When I tried it, the whole room *did* turn dark..."

It took a moment for this to sink in. "Does this mean that my powers are lousy?! Not only the Earth Magic ones, but the Dark Magic ones too?!"

It was a very sad realization that, after finally finding a new spell that wasn't Dirt Bump, what I'd got was Dark Bump.

“This is your first time trying it out, so it’s no surprise that you aren’t good at it yet. But you can even materialize a physical object out of thin air, so I’m sure that with some practice your spells will become very powerful in no time.” Raphael tried to soften the blow, but...

“So was it this small the first time you tried it?” I asked.

He just smiled awkwardly.

I might have been dense, but not *that* dense. I knew he probably made the whole room go dark on his first try. If only I had his talent... However, I understood how important practice was. After years of training, my Dirt Bump had grown a bit too. Thankfully, Raphael was also good at motivating people: he praised me for being able to summon darkness on my first day (even though it was tiny) and convinced me to keep trying so that I could learn to do it even better.

I’m going to train so *hard and become* so *good!* I promised myself, and so my Dark Magic training finally began for real.

“It’s gotten late, so we will stop here for today,” Raphael declared, and I was surprised to notice just how long we’d been in the room. My schedule said that I had to learn Dark Magic in the morning, and then, in the afternoon, go back to deciphering the Dark Covenant. The higher-ups wanted me to juggle both of these tasks at the same time, and I assumed that they didn’t want Raphael, who was already busy, to have these lessons take up his whole day.

“Okay. Thank you!” I said, grateful at how he had not only taught me how to use my first Dark Magic spell, but also praised me —despite the very poor results—making me feel very good about myself. He was an awesome teacher.

While we were getting ready to leave, Larna rushed into the room.

“How’d it go? Did you manage to use it? Dark Magic, I mean!” She was out of breath from running here, and had anticipation written all over her face. Poor Larna couldn’t help it; she just liked magic that much.

“Yes. Katarina is a very good learner, and she has already been able to successfully cast a spell,” Raphael, in all of his kindness, answered.

“It’s all because you’re such a good teacher,” I corrected him, but he humbly refused the compliment.

“I knew it,” Larna crowed. Despite having done nothing to help, she looked very proud of herself.

“Now show me this new spell of yours, would you?” she demanded. She was trying to make it sound like an important order from a superior, but her expression made it clear that she had just asked me out of curiosity.

“Of course,” I replied, starting to visualize the skull wand in my mind and finding it in my hand moments later.

“What is this?!” she screamed, jumping toward me to take a closer look at the wand. Her enthusiasm made me recoil a little bit.

“I was going to report this to you later...” Raphael chimed in, and he went on to explain our findings from that day.

Larna, more excited than I had ever seen her before, was bombarding us with questions: “Can other people touch it too?!” “How does it work?!” and so on.

Thankfully, the always reliable Raphael was there to answer her, because I wouldn’t have been able to keep up with the ridiculous speed of Larna’s questions.

Hearing Raphael’s explanation and examining the wand had mostly satisfied Larna’s curiosity. “Now show me some magic,” she insisted.

“Come forth, Darkness!” I chanted, using the wand to make the tiny dark dot appear.

“Huh?” Larna looked at the dot, confused.

Raphael’s compliments had almost made me forget a very important fact: my powers were terribly weak. I couldn’t blame Larna for her reaction, since mine had been exactly the same. She even started rubbing her eyes and walking closer to the dot just as I had.

Ugh, she must be so disappointed...

“Hahahaha! This is great! Dark Magic can summon such a thing out of nowhere! Interesting,” she chortled, before starting another round of rapid-fire questions: “Is it okay to touch it?” “How does that materialize?” and so on.

I was very relieved to see that she didn’t look the least bit disappointed.

Phew. Now all I have to do is give my best and practice this. And after lunch, I also have to work on the covenant...

★★★★★★

I, Raphael Wolt, was tasked with teaching Katarina Claes how to use Dark Magic.

I already knew that she had been told to study it, but who could have expected that I would be chosen as her teacher? Well... Me. I thought that it was likely to happen, since the person currently in charge of doing so was Sora, who, despite his great talent, wasn't exactly the best at passing on his knowledge to others. He learned by feel rather than through logic and reason, which is why, when asked to explain something, he usually resorted to gestures and sound effects.

Maybe he was too talented for his own good: he immediately succeeded at anything he tried without thinking about it, making it impossible for him to relay his learning process. This was also true of Larna, my superior...and of most other people in my department.

On the other hand, Katarina wasn't the logical reasoning type either, so I thought that there was a chance that things would work out. They did not. What took me by surprise was that it only took one day for everyone involved to admit their failure. I wasn't sure whether to commend how resolute they were in realizing their mistake or reprimand them for how quick they were in giving up. Either way, I was told that teaching Katarina was now my responsibility.

Giving her lessons wasn't a problem for me, and if anything I was glad that I could spend some time with her after so long. What was a problem was the amount of work weighing on my shoulders. This was mostly the fault of the department head, Larna. She was incredibly talented, and she always covered for her subordinates' mistakes. However, once something caught her attention, she had the tendency to focus on that and forget about her work.

When the Ministry took me in after the incident I was involved in a few years ago, Larna was the only one who accepted me, inviting me to her department, instead of treating me like an outcast. I tried my best to repay her with my hard work, and I was eventually promoted, upon my colleagues' recommendations, to vice-director of the department.

I didn't want to disappoint those who had recommended me for that position, and I started working even harder to make up for Larna's absenteeism. People eventually started joking about me being the real department director—and some newcomers even genuinely mistook me for it—and before I knew it I was in charge

of most everything going on in the Magical Tool Laboratory.

Given this situation, I could hardly ever afford to leave the office. While I was teaching Katarina, Larna would need to take my place (which was actually hers to begin with) overseeing the department. She was sorely disappointed about being unable to see Dark Magic being taught, something that she was very interested in, but I eventually convinced her by promising a detailed report. Just in case, before giving out some final instructions to the other employees, I literally chained her to her desk. Once everything was prepared, Katarina and I made for the room that had been set up for us.

Katarina was once a schoolmate of mine, and when I found out that she would be working in the same department as I do, I was overjoyed. I had feared that, after confessing my crimes and my false identity, I would never be able to see her again. Luckily, fate proved me wrong. I was too busy to actually talk to her, but just knowing that we were sharing an office made me happy. As much as I tried to hide it, this rare occasion to actually interact with her had me particularly excited, even though it was just for work. I had to be careful not to break into a silly smile, and when Katarina declared that, for today, I did not need to call her “Lady,” that is exactly what I ended up doing. We had not yet started and I was barely keeping myself together already.

Once we reached the room, I handed her my notes and started explaining some basic concepts, even though I assumed she already knew them. A few years ago, I would have never been able to speak so calmly about the process involved in obtaining Dark Magic powers. What happened to me when I was still a child had traumatized me. It was Katarina who, by reaching out to me, made my wounds start to heal. Things had slowly improved to the point where now those past events didn’t bother me anymore, nor did those terrible nightmares.

I told her that her powers were likely different from either mine or Sora’s, and then I explained how Dark Magic is exerted through an imaginary tool rather than from one’s body. I told her to visualize a tool, and when asked for an example, I told her what mine was: a lantern.

Confused, she asked me why I thought of a lantern. Indeed, lanterns didn’t elicit any image of magic. For me, however, when I first realized I had Dark Magic powers and I thought of how to use

them, that was the first thing that came to mind. When I was dragged into that dark room against my will, the only source of light showing me my surroundings was a single lantern. I associated that sight with Dark Magic itself.

But I didn't want to tell her that, so I tried to dodge the question. She seemed to understand, and didn't press further. Katarina could give off the impression of acting without ever thinking, but she knew which topics to avoid in order not to make someone sad. She also immediately noticed when the people around her were in need, and she quickly offered them help. I was one of the many that she had saved.

As I watched Katarina think of a tool, I thought that such a bleak, grim concept as Dark Magic did not fit her. At the same time, I believed that she had the power to take the bleakness and grimness out of it.

"All right," she announced after deciding on a tool, and, incredibly, something jumped out of her shadow and into her hand.

It was a black stick with a poor rendition of a skull on its tip. Katarina mumbled to herself, surprised by what had happened, but I was even more shocked. Words failed me.

What in the world did I just witness?! I thought, but I quickly realized that the strange object must have been the tool that Katarina imagined. When asked if that was indeed the case, she nodded at me.

She somehow managed to materialize an object out of nothing...

This was all too unexpected. I nervously looked at the stick in her hand. It was peculiar in its shape, but it was clearly visible and seemingly complete.

When I voiced my question of whether someone other than her would be able to touch the object, she handed it to me. I slowly reached for it, asking myself whether it would disappear as soon as I touched it. It didn't disappear or break, and it felt exactly like one would have expected it to. It had nothing out of the ordinary, except maybe for the fact that, despite looking like it was made out of wood, it was weirdly light. I tried examining it more closely, but my confusion remained.

I will need help from another department to investigate this further.

I thanked Katarina, who seemed to have recovered from her own shock, and gave her back the tool, telling her that I wanted to learn more about it. We experimented for a while and found out

that she could not materialize any other objects, but that she could hide this one back in her shadow. After writing as much in my notes, I asked her whether she felt well—we did not have much data on Dark Magic, and it was imperative to pay attention to the health of those wielding it. This went double for Katarina, who often put in a lot of effort without any care for how it could affect her. Thankfully, she told me that she was all right, and she did not look tired or sick in any way.

I suggested that she try casting an actual spell, and her face suddenly turned dark as she asked what kind of spell that would be. I could tell what she was thinking. Someone as kind as her was obviously opposed to controlling people's minds, which was what Dark Magic was mainly known for. I reassured her that we would not be doing that, and her frown quickly changed into a smile. Relieved, I explained that all we would do is summon darkness, listing the reasons why this was ideal for our purposes.

"Oh! It's like Dark Magic for dummies!" she blurted out. I could not help but laugh.

She looked full of energy as she summoned forth darkness, practically screaming, but her spell did absolutely nothing. She tried a few times with no improvement, and finally looked at me as if to seek help. Then she asked me something surprising: "What does darkness look like?"

I was stunned by how ridiculous, yet so befitting of her, that question was. While I was still laughing, she asked me if imagining black paint would work, making it even funnier for me. I gave her a more applicable example, namely that of a starless night. She seemed to finally understand, took the tool in her hand, and flicked it while shouting her summons once again.

Why is she flicking that stick anyway? Is it like an orchestra conductor's baton?

A tiny orb of darkness appeared in front of a very confused Katarina. She looked at it and asked me whether that was indeed Dark Magic; it probably was, even though it was very different from when I tried to use that spell.

"I was expecting the whole room to turn dark or something... This is a bit underwhelming," she lamented, and I had to agree, as I was anticipating a much larger orb of darkness.

I wouldn't have blamed her for thinking that this spell was completely useless, but to convince her otherwise, I told her that I

had used it to do exactly that: make the whole room turn dark. This seemed to shock her.

"Does this mean that my powers are lousy?! Not only the Earth Magic ones, but the Dark Magic ones too?!"

Realizing that I had made a terrible mistake, I nervously tried to fix what I could by telling her that she just needed practice to improve. That wasn't a lie either—Dark Magic powers could be made stronger through training.

My words worked, and she started practicing the same spell over and over.

"Like this?"

"Yes, very good. Just like that."

Being there in that room with her, looking on as she did her best to learn magic, was so fun that the time flew by. Come noon, I stopped her, since she was only to practice with me in the morning, and she thanked me with a smile for the lesson I had given her.

All of a sudden, Larna barged into the room. Given the timing, she had probably managed to finish the work she had to do before rushing here to see the Dark Magic she was so interested in with her own eyes. Katarina showed her what she could do, and Larna seemed very pleased by what she saw. Once we were done, I checked the room to make sure that everything was in its place and then locked the door, reminding myself to give the key back later on.

In the past few hours, I had witnessed a few surprising events, but more than surprise or shock, right now, I only felt happiness. I put a hand on my face and felt my cheeks. They had risen into a smile without me even noticing. It took a serious effort to keep my expression unchanging throughout the morning, but now that I was alone, I couldn't help it anymore.

I knew that this was only work, but I was still delighted by the time I could spend with Katarina. This pure, honest girl had reached her hand out to me, offering salvation...and in that same stroke, she had stolen my heart. Despite all the time that had passed, she still held onto it, and I wondered if I was ever going to be able to retrieve it.

I did not want to make her mine and mine alone, but I longed to help and protect her from the shadows in any way I could. I needed power in order to protect her, and I needed to keep giving my best at the Ministry in order to obtain that power. It was tiring work, yes, but that was no big issue. Seeing her smile after so long had filled me with such vigor that I felt that I could spend a week straight, without sleep, sifting through documents behind my desk.

Chapter 3: Vegetable Delivery

It had been a few days since I'd started learning magic from Raphael, but my tiny dark dot hadn't gotten any bigger. I hadn't made much progress on the Dark Covenant either.

Speaking of things that I hadn't made progress with, I still hadn't discovered the identity of the other secret character in the game, the one I'd learned about in my dream. One of them was Cezar, but the other one remained a mystery. Asking Maria hadn't helped so far.

In order to get my mind off all of the things that weren't going as well as I wished them to, I headed to the fields. Working on the crops always made me feel better—that's why having a hobby you enjoy is so important.

"That's some harvest we've got here. What are you going to do with all this produce?" I asked Cyrus, the field's owner and my farming mentor, as I admired the field full of ripe vegetables.

"Same as e'ry year. Gon' get 'em to the orphanage," he replied while drying off the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. When Maria wasn't there he always let his guard down, and his accent showed through.

"Wow! All of these?!"

Back home, whenever I harvested vegetables, I split them between my friends, the servants, and the kitchen, and that was it. I'd never donated them before.

"Ain't nobody know 'bout this li'l pastime o' mine here. Can't go round handin' out veggies left and right. I got this friend though; he done know 'bout it, so I give 'em to him and he brings 'em over to the orphanage."

"Oh, that explains it."

Cyrus was born to a noble family in the countryside, and that was where he was raised until the age of fifteen, working the fields just like any other farmer. When he came to the capital to attend the academy, he took great care to mask his origins, and he did it so well that now everyone held him in high regard as a cool, aloof,

and handsome guy. Little did they know that he spent his free time tilling the soil in the Ministry's outskirts.

"I heard that donations to the orphanage are mainly to be made in money. I didn't know that you could give them vegetables too," I explained, remembering what father told me about how he periodically donated money to orphanages and commoners' schools. He explained that doing so was expected of a good noble family. He also told me that, since different places have different needs, it was better to just donate money and let them decide how to use it.

"If yer from a fancy family like the Claes be, sure. But just 'cause yer a noble, don't mean ya got the coin to spare. Most folks give stuff 'stead of money."

In this world, it turned out, being a noble didn't necessarily mean that you were fabulously rich. Back at the academy, some of my younger schoolmates from the student council said that they couldn't even afford a dress for the ball. If Cyrus's family had to work the fields, that must have meant that they weren't as wealthy as the Claes family. I had been generalizing a bit too much. This also meant that donating vegetables wouldn't have been weird, and I thought that maybe, next time, I could donate some of the yield from my own crop too.

"I don't tell 'em I'm a noble o' course. Up here in the city nobles don't donate no greens. I tell 'em I'm a merchant," Cyrus added.

So it is a bit weird for a noble to donate vegetables after all.

"If you tell them you're a merchant...does that mean that you actually deliver the vegetables yourself?" I asked, surprised. I had assumed he'd have a friend, or someone else, do it in his stead.

"'Course I do. I done water these here crops with my own sweat and blood. I gotta make sure they get where they ought."

"M-Mister Cyrus, that sounds so cool! I totally get what you mean!" I agreed with him, moved by his passion. *As a farmer, you can't help but be worried about your little vegetable babies! I always even worried about how people cooked them, and if they liked them.*

"Ya do?!"

"I do!"

We nodded at each other in an emotional moment of understanding, mentor to mentee.

"I reckon 's about time we harvest, and then I can deliver 'em on my next free day," he said as he looked at the field with love in his eyes.

“Say... Would it be okay if I tagged along for the delivery?”

“Huh? Sure, I don’t mind,” he answered, a bit surprised.

“Yay!”

Having helped with the farming, I also wanted to make sure that the vegetables, one could say, *got where they ought,* but there was another reason why I was so happy about being able to go with him.

“Just know that, since we gon’ go like merchants, the folks there won’t be treatin’ us like nobles. And the li’l ones always come ’round asking to play with ’em. That fine with you?”

“More than fine!” I replied with a smile.

I had done my fair share of pretending to be a commoner (in order to learn about farming), and I loved playing with children. If anything, a few times I’d been scolded for playing *too hard.*

“Hmm... Checks out, I guess,” he pondered, staring at the kerchief I was wearing over my head.

Cyrus and I then promised to meet on our next free day to deliver the vegetables to the orphanage. Having that to look forward to made me feel much better about all the stuff that was going wrong in my life. I was very excited at the idea of this new experience—pretending to be a merchant and going to the orphanage.

I had been to an orphanage before, but that was for official visits as part of the Claes family. Only the most well-behaved, slightly older children had come to see us, and they were all very stiff, since they knew they were dealing with nobles. They had also cleaned up the place and only showed us around the best parts, probably to give us a good impression. In a sense, my next one was going to be my first proper visit to the orphanage.

After graduating from the academy and starting to work at the Ministry, I realized how little I knew about this world surrounding me. With so little knowledge, even if I managed to escape death and imprisonment and was exiled from the kingdom, I wouldn’t be able to make it by myself. So far, I’d only been able to enjoy the fields and the harbor as a (pretend) commoner, but now I needed to see the city as a whole, including the orphanage.

I didn’t want to be a spoiled, pampered noble lady who knew nothing about real life. I wanted to be able to hold my own in this tough world, and in order to do that I needed more knowledge and more experience, as a commoner and as a farmer.

This vegetable delivery is the perfect chance!

I was so grateful to Cyrus that I wanted to thank him in some way. My usual go-to thank-you gifts were sweets, which he didn't like that much, and vegetables, which he had no shortage of.

Oh, that's right! He'd probably like it if I invited Maria! I'm sure he'd enjoy chatting with her while we go and deliver those vegetables, and they'll have a lot of opportunities to talk there, as opposed to here in the fields. Perfect. I'll go with that.

Before long, it was time to go to the orphanage with Cyrus. He was standing, his face wrinkled up, next to three carriages lit by the morning sun.

"Katarina Claes, do you have a moment?" he addressed me. I walked toward him, fully aware that he was mad at me.

"I'll go straight to the issue. How did *this* happen?" he inquired, pointing at a spot not far away where my friends were happily chatting with each other. It was Keith, Jeord, his brother Alan, Alan's fiancée Mary, Sophia and her brother Nicol, and Maria.

All seven of them were dressed up as merchants, ready to go.

"Well... I told my brother that I was going to go, and he said that he wanted to come with me because he was worried I might get in trouble," I explained.

"I imagine that your brother would say that. Having someone to look after you certainly helps," he replied.

"As for Maria, I invited her for you."

"For me?!" he shouted, blushing.

"I thought it was a good opportunity for the two of you to get to know each other better..."

"I don't remember ever asking you to do anything like that!" he yelped, but I totally saw him smile when he noticed that Maria was there. "A-Anyway, that explains your brother and Maria. But what about the rest? Why are the princes and the chancellor's children here?"

"You see, I ran into Sophia and Mary right as I was inviting Maria, and since we'd promised to meet on our next free day, they decided to come with us too... And the others just kind of invited themselves."

Knowing how busy Jeord, Alan, and Nicol always were, I was genuinely surprised that they'd come.

"Fine... We can't tell them to go home now that they're all here.

There's enough noble blood in this party to run a whole country, but the place we are going to isn't that dangerous anyway..." he mumbled to himself while he held his hand to his forehead. "But there's one more thing I need to ask you," he added. "How did you explain all of these vegetables to them?"

"Don't worry! I just said that someone had a lot of extra vegetables that they needed to get rid of and they asked you to deliver them!" I knew how much Cyrus wanted to keep his hobby secret, and I'd never tell a soul about it.

"I see..." he intoned, staring into nothingness with blank eyes.

As our "little talk" was over, we approached the others.

Keith, Jeord, Mary, and Alan were all talking together.

"I know well how much your important duties keep you busy, Prince Jeord, and you really should not bother with such trivialities as looking after my sister. My protection will more than suffice."

"I would never relinquish the task of protecting my fiancée to another man, my dear Keith."

"Sorry to interrupt you two, but why is Prince Jeord here in the first place today? I don't recall any of us inviting him."

"Oh, Mary, that's delightful. You truly believe yourself to be the only one constantly gathering information about Katarina? And don't forget that my little brother is a terrible liar."

"Prince Alan! You gave information to the enemy?!"

"I didn't tell him anything... Wait, did you say 'enemy'?"

"Asking the servants proved to be enough."

"You sneaky, treacherous..."

"Are you, who always uses Alan to spy on me, really one to talk?"

A few steps away, Maria, Sophia, and Nicol were talking while standing around some sort of box.

"Oh, is that our lunch box?"

"Yes. My brother was so excited by this that he started preparing it last night."

"He can also cook? That is incredible!"

"Not at all. I've just helped out the cooks a bit. Feel free to try it, Maria."

"May I? It's an honor."

"We're ready to leave!" I shouted to everyone, waving my arms

around.

"Very well. Here, Katarina," Jeord said, offering me his hand. I appreciated how princely he always was, but I had other plans.

"I'm sorry, Jeord, I have to attend to some matters with Maria," I told him, before going over to her and elegantly offering her my hand, just as Jeord had done with me, to escort her to the carriage.

"Oh?"

She stared at me with a confused look on her face.

Hmm? Did I do anything weird?

"Big Sister," Keith whispered to me, "exactly what mischief are you planning this time around?"

"Mischief? Please!" I whispered back. "I just want to help Cyrus find love. I must make Maria sit in the same carriage as him."

"Oh, I see..." Keith, although surprised, seemed to be convinced by my explanation. "But I think he's onto your plan. He's sitting next to the coachman," he continued, and when I turned around to look at the carriage, I saw that, indeed, Cyrus had decided to ride *on* the carriage instead of *in* it.

I hurried toward him.

"Mister Cyrus! Why are you sitting over there?"

"I thought that I could help with directions, since I'm so familiar with the road to the orphanage."

"That's very kind of you, but I think your time would be best spent *inside* the carriage, with Maria! I'm sure she wants to chat with you too!"

"Lady Katarina, do you really expect me to spend such a long time in such a confined space, alone with such a beautiful girl? I couldn't. I would probably pass out. I refuse," he protested, without giving me the time to talk back to him.

I could tell from his face that he wasn't joking either, so I had to give up. I realized that Cyrus was even less comfortable around girls than I had ever imagined.

"I've baked these sweets for you. Please have them," Maria said, handing me a basket full of delicious-looking goodies.

"Have this too." Mary showed us a kettle. "It's tea I brewed this morning from specially grown tea leaves."

"Please accept this too. These are some romance novels I am sure you would love," Sophia added as she dropped a large and clearly heavy bag in front of me.

I was grateful to all of them—the sweets looked tasty, the tea

smelled wonderful, and the novels sounded interesting. I just thought they'd all gone overboard with the amounts.

Cyrus was still determined to sit with the coachman, so the rest of us split up, with boys in one carriage and girls in the other. My "help the great-with-work-but-terrible-with-girls Cyrus get comfortable around Maria" plan failed, but I was happy that I could spend some time chatting with my friends.

"Thank you, everyone! Let's eat!" I cheered, and we all shared Maria's sweets, which turned out to be as yummy as they looked, and Mary's tea, which had the perfect light taste to complement them.

I was actually very hungry, since I'd had to wake up very early and hadn't had time to eat breakfast. Now happy and fed, we started talking.

"Nicol was so excited! He even prepared food that we could eat while traveling. Feel free to partake."

"Did your brother make this? He's so good!"

"I had a taste earlier, and it was very delicious."

"He's really a man of many talents."

"Is he not? My brother can do just anything."

"You really love him, don't you, Sophia?"

"Of course. Oh, but I love you too, Katarina!"

"Aw, thank you!"

"Lady Sophia, please don't make it sound like you are alone in that. I love Katarina just as much."

"Thanks, Mary!"

"M-Me too. I also love Lady Katarina very much."

"Thank you too, Maria! I love all of you back!"

"L-Lady Katarinaaa!"

"M-Mary?! Why are you hugging me all of a sudden?!"

"Sorry! I could not control myself."

"No problem. The food is safe. I managed not to drop anything!"

We had a lot of fun riding together, enjoying some time between girls.

I just have to remember to compliment Nicol. This is delicious.

★★★★★

How did it come to this?

I, Jeord Stuart, let out a sigh as I gazed upon my fellow coach riders. My younger brother Alan was there, as was Katarina's brother Keith, and Nicol, the chancellor's son. I had known all of them for at least ten years now.

It all started when I noticed Alan's recent behavior: I could not tell why, but he was clearly acting strangely, as if he was nervous. I started questioning the servants, which led me to discover that he was planning an excursion with his fiancée Mary. This was already suspicious, as the two of them almost never met alone if not on official business, and even overlooking that, Alan had no reason to be nervous about it. I kept looking into the matter, and as expected, the aforementioned excursion was to also include Katarina and her other friends.

This, in a sense, explained Alan's nervousness: Mary had probably told him to keep their plans a secret from me, and, at the same time, to spy on me too for good measure. My brother, being little more than a docile servant to his fiancée, would surely have obeyed. This was clearly a mistake on Mary's part however, as that responsibility had weighed on Alan so much that I ended up finding out what he was trying to hide. She had sadly overestimated his ability to lie and deceive.

Owing to this, I successfully invited myself to the excursion which, originally, was meant to involve everyone except me. I imagined myself sitting next to my dear Katarina, but...

"Oh! You really cooked this yourself, Nicol?!"

"Wow. This looks delicious."

"I only just helped the cooks, really... But do try it out."

"With pleasure... Oh! It *is* delicious!"

"I'll try one too then... I must say, Nicol, you're incredible. I didn't know cooking was one of your skills."

Alan and Keith were eating what Nicol had prepared. He received their compliments without changing his expression, but I could somehow feel how pleased he was. I personally had not been able to eat breakfast that morning, as our departure was set very early so that we might help with this delivery. Bringing food for everyone was a very considerate thing to do, but at the same time, the weirdness of the situation—two men happily praising another man's food while riding together in a small carriage—irked me to no end.

Once again, I had to ask myself how things had come to this,

and I thought back on what had happened earlier. Katarina, refusing my offer to escort her, took Maria with her. Keith then said something to her, and Katarina ran toward Cyrus Lanchester. I could not hear their conversation, but, after talking with Cyrus, Katarina looked disappointed. I tried to approach her so that I could relieve her of that disappointment, but some of my powerful rivals spoke before I could. They offered her gifts of food, drink, and entertainment, quickly turning her frown into a smile.

"Let's have Maria's sweets with this tea then. We four girls should ride together," Mary told her, smiling as well. Sophia seemed to agree, which meant that her brother, who was sickeningly attached to her, automatically agreed with the idea as well. As a result, all of us non-girls had no choice but to ride together in a different carriage.

Maria, who had been escorted by Katarina moments earlier for some mysterious reason, seemed enthusiastic at the idea of sharing the trip with her friend, although she probably had no ulterior motive. Someone who definitely had ulterior motives was Mary Hunt, who sent me a gaze full of mockery and satisfaction. I could imagine the four of them having fun riding together, chatting and enjoying their tea.

"What are you spacing out for, Jeord? Come back down from the clouds and try Nicol's lunch. It's amazing," Alan remarked while grabbing more food out of the lunch box.

Seeing his nonchalantly happy expression annoyed me so much that I hit him on the head with the side of my hand.

"Ouch! What are you doing?! Look! I dropped it!" he grumbled, hurrying to pick up the food that was now on the floor. "I'm sorry, Nicol..."

"Don't worry about it," Nicol replied.

"Please excuse my stupid brother," I added, as was my responsibility, and Alan stared at me with contempt.

"It's all your fault!"

"You should have been more careful."

"I swear, Jeord...!"

Keith, meanwhile, was looking for something inside of his bag.

"Here, Alan, you can throw the food away in this bag. And use this handkerchief to clean your hands," he declared, handing my brother those two items. Alan, in response, looked at him, shocked.

"Wow, do you always go out prepared like this? What are you,

a housewife?" Alan shot back with a hint of sarcasm.

"Oh, it's just... I'm used to this kind of thing," Keith replied, looking down in embarrassment.

"Keith would make a wonderful mother. Anyone would want someone like him as their wife," Nicol complimented, or maybe insulted, him.

Alan burst into laughter, and Keith shook his head.

"Nicol, you might have noticed that I am a man. I could never be a mother, and I have no plans to become anyone's wife either."

"I see. That is a shame," Nicol, dead serious, replied.

"Truly a shame," Alan agreed, still laughing.

My first free day in so long, and I had to spend it not with Katarina, exchanging sweet words of love, but with these three men.

All in all though... I could enjoy that for what it was. Years ago I would have hated every moment of this trip, but maybe I had changed. I welcomed change, as it helped expand my horizons. And the catalyst for my change, of course, was Katarina.

I deemed it a good time to join whatever was going on.

"Should you ever change your mind and become someone's wife, Keith, just let me know. As your brother-in-law, I will happily provide you with the most beautiful wedding gown in the whole kingdom," I promised with a smile, and Keith furrowed his brow.

"I need no gown! And I do not see you becoming my brother-in-law either!"

"Aw, what are you saying now? I will marry Katarina, which will make me your brother-in-law."

Strangely, Alan reacted to my words before Keith himself did.

"Huh... So Keith would become my younger brother-in-law..."

"Alan! Do not join him in his delusions!"

"But isn't that the truth? You *are* younger than both of us..."

"Of course I am younger than both of you, but you're missing the point!"

It had been a long time since the four of us had all been together. It was a noisy, rowdy trip...but I enjoyed it.

★★★★★

"We have arrived."

The coachman announced the end of our trip, and we left the

carriage, finding ourselves in a relatively wide garden. A path led to a large building—most likely, the orphanage. The building itself was bigger than the orphanages I'd seen in the capital, but, other than that, it wasn't that different. Orphanages in Sorcié were run by the country and financed with regular donations from nobles, so they were usually clean and well-kept. The children there went to school, and after graduation, the orphanage would recommend them for various jobs.

An old woman was walking in our direction, coming from the building.

"Thank you for coming this year too. We appreciate it a lot," she greeted Cyrus.

"You didn't need to come all the way here to meet us—thank you. These here are the people that I told you would be coming with me to help," Cyrus said, pointing at us.

"Oh my, that is quite a few more than I had expected. All the better! My name is Maggie, and I run this orphanage. It is a pleasure to meet you all," the woman spoke with a smile.

Before coming here, Cyrus had told me that the orphanage's director—the woman who was now in front of us—was the only one to know about his true identity. It was safe to assume that she also knew about us, but if she did, she certainly didn't let it show.

"Let's bring those veggies in, shall we?" she asked us with a smile.

Since there were so many of us, the carriages were empty in no time. However, Maggie wanted us to help with something else... Something surprising.

"We have to teach the kids?" I asked Cyrus, shocked, and he nodded.

"Orphanages send the children to school, but they do not have the resources to hire individual tutors. That is why, whenever a guest stops by, they usually stay a little longer to help out the children with their homework, or to teach them about sewing and other housework. I personally do it every time I come. Knowledge is paramount to a successful future for these orphans."

In this world, or at least in wealthy and advanced Sorcié, everyone went to school, where they could all take the same classes. However, there was no individual tutoring, nor were there any classes about sewing, cooking, or any other skill like that. You would need someone to teach you those things outside of school, so

what Cyrus had said made sense, except for the fact that I'd never seen anything like that on my official visits to orphanages.

Cyrus shrugged when I asked him about it. "Do you really think they would ask nobles to do it? That would make the children so nervous that they wouldn't learn anything anyway."

He has a point. I know I'd be nervous if I were a commoner meeting a noble. That being said, I had no idea we'd have to help the children study...

"I will be helping them with homework, as I always do," Cyrus told us. "What about you?"

"I will do the same. I do not know enough about sewing or cooking to be able to teach anyone," Nicol replied.

"I believe I could teach them sewing," Sophia interjected, timidly raising her hand.

"Me too. I know a bit about sewing myself," Mary declared. I knew that not to be true, however, since she knew *everything* about sewing. They didn't call her the lady among ladies for no reason.

"I could teach them cooking, although I'm not exactly an expert," Maria, who *definitely* was an expert, humbly followed.

"You two are very good teachers. Won't you join me in overseeing the children's homework?" Nicol asked Jeord and Keith, who quickly nodded in agreement.

Wow, everyone's already decided what they want to do. As for me...

"Okay then, I'll go with Maria and teach the children how t—"

"Big Sister, no. No cooking."

"The orphanage probably needs their kitchen, Katarina."

Keith and Jeord stopped me right in my tracks.

Aw, c'mon... I only destroyed the academy's kitchen by accident! Well, and the kitchen in Claes Manor too, but that was also an accident! I cook without any accidents most *of the time...*

"But I can't help children with homework, and the last time I tried sewing I gave myself sutures! Cooking is the only thing I could help with!"

I only barely made it through the academy with average grades thanks to my smart friends, and as mother always said, letting me sew was a very good way to turn fabric and thread into garbage.

"Th-That's true... There's not much you could teach children..."

Is that pity in your eyes, Keith?!

"You should take care of cheering us on, Katarina."

That doesn't count as helping, Jeord...

I was sure that I was able to do *something* useful, and I asked Maggie whether I could help with cleaning or doing the laundry.

"We already have people hired to do that..." She thought for a while. "Oh! Of course!" she then said, clapping her hands together.

"Why do I have to come with you and play with children?!"

"You said it yourself, Alan: you aren't great at teaching things to others," I explained to him.

I had noticed how, while all the others were going ahead and proposing to do this or that, he had looked anything but enthusiastic. Of course, I took advantage of that.

"Sure, I'm not great, but that doesn't mean I have *nothing* to teach them...unlike you."

"Now, now, don't make a fuss. We're going to play with children! What's not to like?" I answered brightly, trying to stop his grumbling.

Children who were too young to go to school played amongst themselves under adult supervision, Maggie explained, but they really had a lot of fun whenever an adult actually played with them, and so she asked us to indulge them. That was definitely something even I could do, so I gladly accepted, bringing Alan with me because, one, he had said that he wasn't great at teaching, and, two, being the only adult there wouldn't be as fun.

The others, when they heard that I was going to play with children, suddenly decided that they wanted to do that too. It was no surprise that they'd rather play than teach. However, Maggie told them that they didn't need that many people for such an easy task, and they had to give up. I could see the envious looks they were pointing at Alan though.

I'll do their share of playing too then!

"So, what kind of game do you want to play?" I asked the children.

I was told that the children often played indoors, but, since we had such good weather today, we could go out in the garden. The place reminded me of the playground in my previous life's school, except that it was covered in well-trimmed, soft grass so that the children wouldn't hurt themselves falling.

All the kids looked like they were used to having adult guests, so they immediately took to us.

"Tag!"

“A race! I wanna race!”

“Let’s do hide-and-seek!”

They all sounded enthusiastic, but they couldn’t agree on a game.

“Okay then! We’ll play all those games one at a time. Let’s start with tag,” I announced, and I struck a menacing pose. “I’m it! And I’m gonna get youuu! Run for your liiiife!”

“Wahhh!”

“Hahaha!”

“Yeeek!”

The children, amused, started running in every direction, and I chased after them.

They’re just little children. I’m going to catch all of them in no time, I thought, but...

“Gotcha!” I said, putting my arms around a girl so small that she barely reached my waist. She was squealing with delight, but I was almost out of breath. They were a bunch of swift young whippersnappers, that’s for sure. I wouldn’t have had any problem had it been one or two, but with so many of them this was getting to be a real workout.

I have to do something...

I saw Alan, who was looking at our game of tag without participating.

“Alan! Join us!”

“Huh? Me?”

“Who else? You came here to play with the children, so come and play!” I invited, trying to force an unenthusiastic Alan to help me.

“Everyone! Now, you’ll have to run from both me and him!”

The children were very excited at the news.

“I never agreed t—”

“Perfect! Let’s start!”

“Sheesh... Fine, whatever. I’m going to catch everyone in no time!”

Alan started running after the children, and he was exceptional —he really caught one after the other. I couldn’t let him do all the work though. I saw him chasing a very quick boy, so I headed for the direction where the two were going and hid behind a tree, planning an ambush.

“Hehe! You can’t catch me!”

“Ugh! You fast little…!”

“Aha! You fell into my trap!” I shouted when the two were close enough to the tree, and I jumped out toward them.

“Oh! That was close,” the kid exclaimed, swiftly dodging out of the way and past my side. Unfortunately, it was too late for me to stop, and I ended up running straight into Alan.

“Eek!”

“Gahh!”

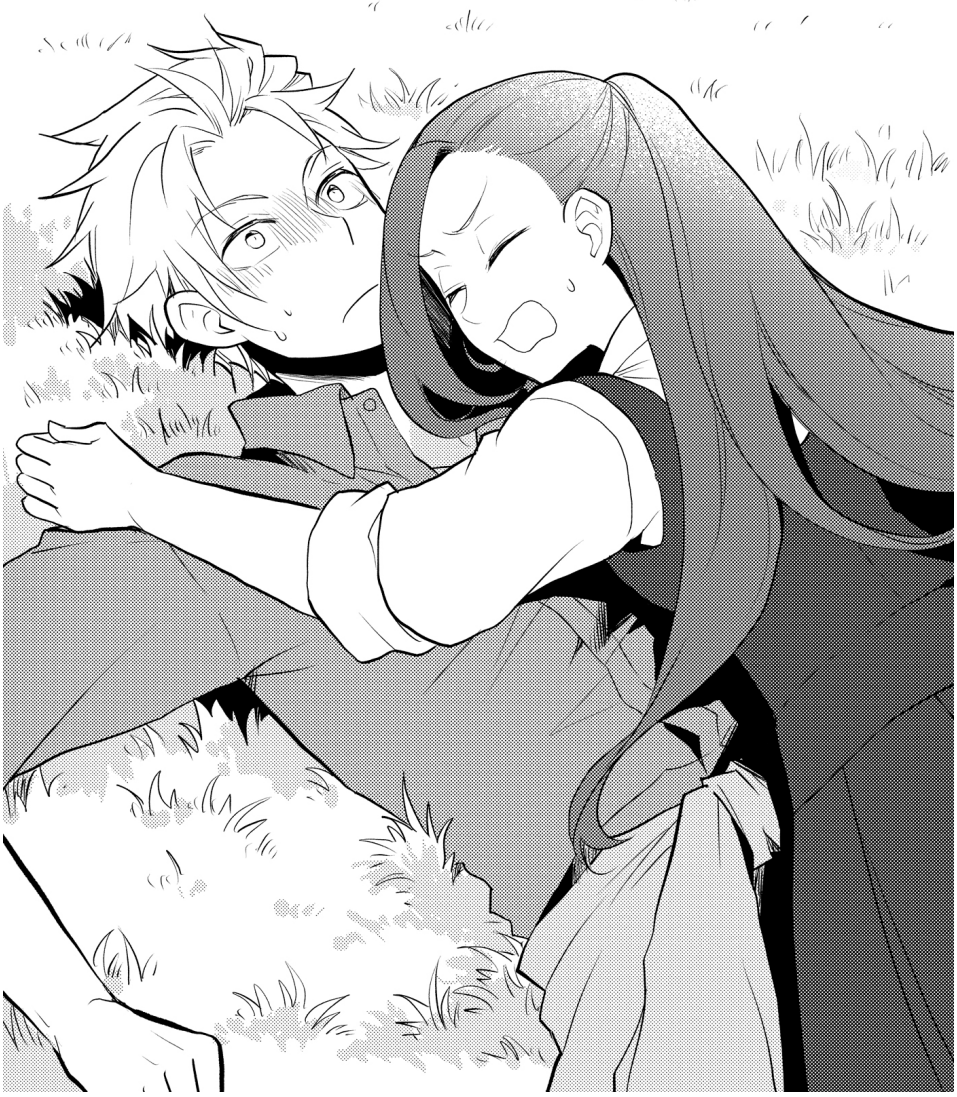
I heard Alan scream, and I anticipated a painful fall to the ground.

Hmm? That wasn’t painful at all.

When I opened my eyes, instead of the green grass, I saw something pink. Instead of the flat terrain I was expecting, behind me I could feel all sorts of bumps.

“Would you get off already?”

I heard Alan speak directly into my ear, and, when I looked more closely, I realized that the pink thing I saw before me was his face. When I looked around even more, I realized that I was not resting on the ground at all. I was resting on Alan.



“Ohhh! Sorry!” I apologized, quickly getting off of him.

“Can’t you be a tiny bit careful?!” he snapped, breathing heavily, with a hand to his face. More than pink, right now, he was red.

“I must have hit you so hard that your whole face turned red! I’m so sorry!”

My face slammed straight into his face, so that must have hurt.

“No, this is... Don’t worry about it. Go get some rest. Your legs must be tired,” he suggested before running off toward the children once again.

Maybe the reason I couldn’t stop myself in time was because, as he had said, my legs were tired. If he hadn’t been there to soften the blow, I’d have dived into the ground face-first.

He’s always complaining about stuff, but deep down he’s a really kind guy. He’s been like this since we were kids! I guess I’ll take his advice and go rest for a while.

I sat down in the shade of a tree and watched Alan chasing after the children. They already seemed to be having a lot of fun playing with him.

Alan would make a really good dad, I thought as I enjoyed some rest.

★★★★★★

I, Alan Stuart, was running as fast as I possibly could. I needed to do that in order to take my mind off of what had just happened. I mean, the fact that I’d have to play with children was enough of a surprise already. I thought I’d help them with homework, even though I wasn’t that good at that kind of thing, but Katarina had dragged me into this instead.

The situation itself was annoying, but I was glad I could spend time with the girl I had feelings for. Of course, she didn’t know this. Nobody did. She was my brother’s fiancée, so I had to keep it a secret. Not that I was expecting anything to play out between us, either before today or in the future. But still, just being here, looking at Katarina, was enough to put a smile on my face. While she chased after those kids, running out of breath, she was as lovely as she’d always been since I first met her when we were kids

ourselves. Looking at Katarina, yeah, that would have been enough. But I was in for another surprise...

I was going after a particularly fast kid when all of a sudden Katarina jumped out in front of me from behind a tree. We crashed into each other, and I did my best not to hurt her, but in order to do that I had to sacrifice my balance and fall backward, allowing her to fall on top of me. Since we were facing each other, we ended up kind of...hugging. As if that wasn't enough, her lips even smacked against my cheek. I couldn't tell whether she didn't realize it or was just pretending not to, but as far as I was concerned that was a huge shock. I felt the blood rush to my head.

I mean... Her lips! On my cheek! That's just like getting kissed on the cheek! They're so, well, soft. And her body pushed against me... No! The more I think about this the worse I'm going to make it for myself!

I shook my head like I wanted to make my thoughts fall out of it and went back to playing tag with the kids. I had to focus on running. By the time I'd caught all of them, I had calmed down a bit.

The girl who had made me feel so weird in the first place then had the gall to come to me and say, "You're very good at playing with children, Alan. I'm sure you'll make a great dad one day."

Her words and the casual way she said them left me so appalled that I whacked her on the head.

"Ouch! Alan! What are you doing?!"

Even the way she looked mad after that, with her cheeks puffed up, was cute. I remembered the feeling of her lips on my face and got all fidgety again.

Calming down completely is going to take me some time...

★★★★★★

"Hide! One... Two..."

One of the older kids had closed her eyes and started counting. After tag and racing, it was time for hide-and-seek.

We were playing in pairs, and the smallest children had immediately paired up with the older ones, as if they were used to always doing so. One of the girls, who looked a bit too sassy for her age, chose Alan to pair up with her.

That's one of Fortune Lover*'s male characters for you. Even little girls like him.*

As for me, nobody had asked me to pair up with them. It's not that the kids didn't like me; they just told me that they saw me trip during tag and drag my feet during the race, and they didn't want to lose this game. The world of children was a tough but just one.

Since I was totally spent, this actually gave me the perfect opportunity to rest. I would find a good hiding spot, far away from the counting kid, and take a breather there. During my search for the perfect hiding place, I saw a kid walk all alone through the garden. This kid looked older than the ones we were playing with—definitely of school age, at least. That was weird, since the older children were supposed to be inside of the orphanage, studying.

Maybe they also send kids on errands sometimes, I thought while the kid walked away.

After running around the building's corner, I found another person I wasn't expecting to see in the garden.

"Nicol?!" I called out to him, and he looked up toward me dejectedly.

"Oh, Katarina..."

His expression was as neutral as always, but I could tell that he was feeling down.

"Why are you here? Weren't you helping the children with homework?" I asked, remembering that he'd personally offered to do that.

"I was told to leave... They said that the children cannot concentrate if I'm around," he reported sadly.

I always forgot about that, having known him for so many years, but Nicol was cursed with being so attractive that he ended up charming everyone even if he didn't mean to. I definitely saw why he would be too much for those pure and innocent children.

I understood that, but that wasn't his fault. It wasn't anybody's fault. If you wanted to place blame, you would have to blame the heavens who gifted him with that wicked charm. He knew he couldn't help it, but I didn't want to see him so sad. According to Sophia, he was looking forward to coming here with us so much that he'd stayed up late cooking, and now he was here, alone and unable to help.

Maybe it was because I'd been playing with children for so long, but right now, to me, he looked like a small, sad child. I walked toward him and hugged his head, gently stroking his hair.

"Don't worry, Nicol. We'll find something that you can help

with. Together."

I could feel him twitch in my arms, but then he stopped moving and let me pat his head. Nicol had grown up so much... He was way taller than me now. But somehow, I remembered the young Nicol from my childhood.

★★★★★★

I, Nicol Ascart, have sinned: I let Katarina Claes, my friend's fiancée, embrace my head, without asking her to stop or moving away. Worse yet, I enjoyed it.

There was no doubt in my mind that Katarina's gesture had no romantic meaning as far as she was concerned. She just saw me looking sad and comforted me in the same way she would have done with one of the younger children that she had been playing with. I could have insisted, "I'm fine now," and that would have been enough for her to release me from that warm, sweet hug.

However, whatever her intentions, that was not something that a woman of her age should be doing to a man in such a place, with no one around. Had Jeord—or anybody else, for that matter—seen us, it would have led to incredible trouble. The rational part of me knew that I had to tell her, "I'm fine now."

The part of me who had hidden my feelings for her for so many years, however, forbade me from speaking those words. It was wallowing, reveling in Katarina's warmth. Though this whole incident had started through no fault of my own, I realized that it was my responsibility to act before I lost the last remnants of that composure which Katarina's touch had already made thin. Worst of all, I could feel myself longing for more. I knew that just being there, touched by her, was bad, and I did not want to make it worse.

"Ah! Found ya!"

A young girl came out of nowhere and shouted at Katarina, at which point I hurriedly escaped her embrace.

"Aw! You found me!" Katarina, nonchalant to a degree I could only dream of, conceded, heading toward the girl.

"I can't find the other big mister though..." the child observed.

"The big mister is very smart, so he's probably hiding where it's difficult to find. I'll help you search for him!"

"Thanks!" the child replied to Katarina before pointing at me.

“What about that mister over there?” she asked.

“Can he play too?” Katarina asked back.

“Sure!” the girl happily agreed.

“Would that not be a problem, Katarina?”

“Oh, don’t worry, these children are way too young. Let’s go!” Katarina responded with a smile, holding out her hand. Before I could think about what to do, my hand had already moved to meet hers.

★★★★★★

I got poor Nicol to play with us, hoping that it’d make him feel better. I thought that the kids were too young to be attracted to him, but they were all staring at him with wide eyes, going, “That mister is so handsome!” Thankfully, since we weren’t studying, being unable to concentrate wasn’t really a problem, and, once the game started, everyone focused on running anyway.

This addition to the grown-ups team had made me lose yet another position in the popularity ranking. I couldn’t blame the kids for liking the smart, handsome, and fast mister rather than the clumsy, slow miss…but it did make me kind of sad.

Right as I was starting to feel a little blue, one of the orphanage’s employees walked out to the garden to tell everyone that it was snack time. I was no kid and certainly no orphan, but I figured I’d sneak in and partake of the snacks. We all went into the dining hall, where the kids sat down to eat. Today’s snack seemed to be some simple cookies. I ate one and a mellow, pleasant sweetness immediately spread in my mouth.

“Hmm? I know this taste…” I muttered to myself.

“I’m impressed you’d recognize it,” the orphanage’s employee remarked. “It was that girl from your group, Maria, who baked them.”

That explained why the cookie tasted familiar—I’d had one of Maria’s sweets just hours earlier in the carriage.

She’s such a good cook. It’s such a simple, unassuming cookie, but it tastes great. All the kids are stuffing their faces too. Isn’t she awesome? I thought with pride, despite not having done anything to be proud of. Right at that moment, Maria walked into the dining hall, accompanied by a group of children who looked slightly older than the ones I’d been playing with.

“We made these cookies together,” Maria told everyone, introducing the kids one by one and praising them for how skilled they were, how good they were at mixing flour, and so on.

They definitely looked proud of themselves when they heard Maria’s compliments, and the smaller children were also looking up to them with sparkling eyes. Only someone like Maria could make them look like that.

“Maria,” I spoke up, walking over to her after she was done with the introductions, “you’re really incredible. The cookies were delicious, and look at the faces of these children!”

She shook her head.

“The children were the incredible ones. They all gave their best,” she deflected humbly, and then we told each other in detail what we’d been up to. Maria recounted her cooking class and I recounted playtime.

“After we finished baking, the children said that they wanted to try making something savory too. We obtained permission, so we will cook something for dinner too. We just need to go and buy some ingredients.”

“You and the children?”

“No, that would be dangerous. It will be me and some of the employees.”

“I see. Oh...! I know! Maria, there’s someone much better than the orphanage’s employees to help you out with shopping!” I told her.

This time I’m going to make it count. It’s time to repay him for all he’s done for me!

Chapter 4: Shopping in the Little Town

After thinking about it for a while, Cyrus dismissed my proposal. “I can’t.”

“But why?! It’s not like being stuffed together inside a carriage! I’m sure you’ll be fine!” I countered.

“That is true, but it would still be only the two of us. When I’m working, I can focus on that and ignore the rest, but this is a personal errand. Being all alone with such a cute girl would be…unbearable,” he insisted, frowning.

I had invited Maria here so that Cyrus could spend time with her, but he had refused to sit with her inside the carriage and he’d had almost no opportunity to talk to her while helping out at the orphanage.

My proposal was that the two of them go shopping together. Since he came here every year, Cyrus was as comfortable with this town as he was uncomfortable with girls, and as a department director at the Ministry, he was talented enough to take on any kind of mission. He was the perfect man to accompany Maria. Maria also said that having him come along would make her feel safer, but he wasn’t having any of that.

I sighed and looked him straight in the eye. “At this rate, you will grow old without ever managing to speak to a girl. Are you really okay with that?”

“I-I’m not, but…”

“You think that Maria is lovely, don’t you?”

“I do, but being alone with her would be…” he mumbled, unable to find the right words. After thinking silently for a while, his face lit up. “Why don’t you come along too then?”

“What? But then you wouldn’t be alone with her…”

“Exactly. I couldn’t take it if it were just the two of us. But if you were there, I think I could manage it, like when we are working on the fields,” he continued, his eyes sparkling with determination.

Sometimes the three of us worked together on the fields, that's true, but I would be the only one chatting with Maria, while Cyrus smiled and looked at us like a quiet grandpa watching over his two granddaughters. If that was his definition of "managing it," then he really had a long way to go before he got comfortable around girls.

I wonder how he and Maria grow closer in the game. Finishing his route must be a pain.

After he insisted so much, I couldn't refuse. I ended up tagging along with him and Maria. I was disappointed that Cyrus had spoiled a perfectly good chance to be alone with her, but Maria told me, "I'm very happy that you will be coming with us too," so I figured that it wasn't that bad of a trade-off.

We took note of how much of each ingredient we would need to cook for everyone, got the money to buy everything from an orphanage employee, and set out. I was told that it would only take a little more than ten minutes to reach the center of the town on foot.

All my other friends, probably thinking that going to shop in this little town sounded like fun, started saying that they wanted to come too, but Maggie sternly declared that three people was more than enough for such a simple errand.

"Being able to go shopping with you again so soon is a very nice surprise," Maria exclaimed, giggling happily.

"Oh, yeah, we did it back in that port town too. That was fun!" I replied.

That was a nice memory—the two of us had managed to find some free time for a walk during our undercover mission at Ocean Harbor.

"And I also saw the sea for the first time. It was marvelous," Maria added.

"Oh, it really was. We should go there again, but for pleasure this time!"

"Really?! That would be wonderful!"

Next time I want to go there with all my friends, and actually play at the beach, swim, and have lots of fun.

I turned around to check on Cyrus, and he had his grandpa-looking-at-his-granddaughters face on. I knew that I had to involve him in the conversation, or this whole outing would be wasted and he would make no progress.

"Have you ever been to the sea, Mister Cyrus?" I asked, and he

looked surprised that I had addressed him at all.

He tersely replied, “Yes. For work.” And that was it.

Come on, you can’t cut it short like that!

He was way more talkative when it was just the two of us, but right now he sounded like he was on a very strict word budget. Just having Maria around made him too nervous to speak properly. I really wondered how he was supposed to establish a romantic relationship with Maria within the game. At this point, even Dewey, who was just a kid, had managed more meaningful conversations with her—and he was in love with her just as much.

The problem, however, was that when I was chatting with Cyrus, the topic was always farming, vegetables, or something like that. It wasn’t easy to bring up a topic like that under these circumstances.

All of a sudden, Maria asked Cyrus a question.

“If you went there for work, does that mean that your hometown was not on the sea?”

She made a thoughtful remark and *gave him the chance to talk more! This girl is smart!*

“Yes, since it’s way in the country. Nothing but mountains all around,” he confirmed.

That’s a slightly longer answer than before, huh. Maybe he likes talking about his hometown.

“You were born near the border with Xiarmah, correct? I did not know that it was a mountainous region,” Maria replied.

He only mentioned that once when we were working together on the fields, and she still remembers it… Wow. I just barely remembered that his hometown was close to some *border.*

“Oh, you remembered where my hometown is?” Cyrus marveled, sounding surprised but looking pleased. “There is a big mountain that lies exactly on the border, and several smaller ones on our side. We were always playing in the mountains when I was a child.”

That must be why I feel this weird connection with him! I also always played on the mountains back in my previous life!

“What kind of activities can children do for play there?” Maria asked, her eyes widened with curiosity.

“All kinds of things! Fishing in the rivers, climbing on trees, picking fruit…” he elaborated.

He looked like he was having fun reminiscing about his

childhood, and I got lost in my memories as well. I used to fashion fishing rods out of branches, march around the forest looking for fruit and mushrooms, and sometimes I would race with one of my older brothers, the one who was closest in age to me, to see who could climb a tree faster. Those were the days.

"That sounds like a wonderful place to grow up in," Maria concluded with a smile, making Cyrus both happy and embarrassed. I was also happy, since it felt like Maria was praising my past-world hometown too.

Right after Maria and Cyrus had finished their most personal conversation to date, we reached the center of the city, where the store we were supposed to shop at was located. The place, which was the most developed area in the vicinity of the orphanage, was bustling with activity.

"It's way more crowded than I expected," I murmured, seeing people going around in numbers that rivaled the capital's downtown.

"It really is. Usually there are fewer people around though..." Cyrus, who had been there several times, remarked. He cocked his head to the side, confused.

We walked all the way to the store, staying close together so as not to lose sight of each other. Once inside, we asked the store clerk why there were so many people around, and he told us, "A troupe of traveling entertainers came into town today, and everyone's been flocking in from other towns and villages to see them."

"Traveling entertainers?!"

I had heard of such people, but I had never seen them in person, because just like romance novels, they were not considered a suitable pastime for nobles.

"We need to go back to the orphanage and prepare dinner. We don't have time to go see them," Cyrus stated before I could even ask.

Bummer... I guess I knew we were busy to begin with, but still...

We bought the ingredients we needed and we were on the way out when the store clerk stopped us.

"You'd better be careful out there. With all these people around, there's bound to be an ill-intentioned criminal or two, and you people really stand out," he cautioned.

"Thank you," we answered, grateful for his warning, and we left.

That guy had a point. We don't know what kind of people could be lurking around the corner, and we have a beautiful girl like Maria with us. We must keep our eyes peeled.

By the way, neither Maria nor I had to carry anything back to the orphanage. Cyrus did all the work, saying that he didn't need any help.

★★★★★★

"Good luck, Sarah," he called, sending me on my way.

The town was full of people who had come here to see the traveling entertainers. I had thought that this would mean that I had more potential experimental subjects, but things weren't quite that easy. Maybe it was because of the festive atmosphere, but I couldn't find anyone who looked like a fitting vessel for darkness.

The main street won't do, I realized, and I headed for a minor back alley.

The kid I saw walking into the alley by himself was exactly what I needed. The fact that he was alone was already promising, and his eyes didn't have much life in them either. And of course, the younger the better.

I started running after him, but I felt something hit my shoulder.

"Ouch! Whatcha think yer doin'?!" I heard someone say.

It was a man. I could easily tell that he was the rude type, and he had obviously had too much to drink on this festive day.

I have found the perfect subject... I can't let anybody stop me before I've even tried capturing him.

I ignored the man to chase after the kid, but he blocked me by walking in front of me.

"Are ya ignorin' me, huh?! Look how much I'm hurt after ya bumped inta me!" the man shouted into my face. A gust of disgusting alcohol stench came out of his mouth along with the words. "Huh? I hadn't noticed, 'cause of yer hood, but yer a girl! I thought I was gonna ask ya to pay me, but instead I'll just have y __"

Before he could finish speaking, I had already cast a Dark Magic spell on him. He silently dropped on the ground.

"You made me lose such a fine subject..."

I wish he had chosen someplace else to be drunk.

However, now that I knew who to look for, I just had to find him again. I dragged the man's body where it wouldn't be seen, to avoid any trouble.

★★★★★★

Once we left the store, it looked like there were even more people in the streets.

"Those entertainers must be all the rage," I observed, surprised by the crowd that they'd drawn into town.

"They came near my hometown once, but I do not remember them being quite this popular..." Maria replied.

"And did you go see them?"

"I only saw them in passing; I did not see their show."

"Oh. We should go together then, when we have the time."

"I would love to," she agreed with a smile.

I now had one more promise with Maria that I was looking forward to keeping. The sea, the traveling entertainers... It all sounded like fun.

"I wonder why so many people want to see them though, especially since that wasn't the case when they came near Maria's town."

"Most likely," Cyrus replied, "coming here is very easy for the people living in neighboring villages, given the geography in this area. And it's possible that this specific troupe is a very popular one to begin with."

"There are more and less popular troupes? I didn't even know that there were that many traveling entertainers in the first place..."

"Of course. There are large troupes and small ones, great ones and mediocre ones. Some of them are just a few people going around Sorcié, while others have many more members and travel all around the world. When one of the latter is visiting, people just naturally rush to see them."

"I see...!" I was very interested in that explanation, and Maria, who probably didn't know much about traveling entertainers either, was also listening intently.

Traveling the world as an entertainer... That must be so cool. I really want to watch one of their shows one day.

"Now, let's go through this crowd and back to the orphanage already," Cyrus instructed, persuading us to work up our courage

and plunge into the sea of people.

"I'm scared that this time, even staying close together won't cut it. We're definitely going to lose each other."

"You're right," Cyrus concurred. "Should we tie ourselves to each other with a piece of string or something?"

That sounded like a very bad idea. In the first place, we didn't have any string, and even if we did, I didn't want to be tied on a leash.

"Can't we just hold hands?" I suggested, and I saw him immediately freeze in shock.

Oh, right. Holding hands with a girl would probably make him too nervous. But...

"We must do it. But don't worry, holding hands is no big deal. I'm sure you've had to escort a noblewoman or two before," I whispered to him.

All nobles had to be accompanied by a member of the opposite sex during their debut in high society, and that definitely involved holding hands. I figured that this wouldn't be his first time.

"Whenever I've had to escort a woman..." he whispered back, looking down at the ground, "I've always asked my mother or my aunt to be my partner..."

So he's only escorted relatives so far... Well, Keith escorts me all the time, and he's my brother. Cyrus really goes out of his way to avoid young women though... I guess that's in character for him.

"Do you want to live the rest of your life without having ever held hands with a girl? This is your chance. Just go and take Maria's hand. It'd be perfectly natural to do so now. Go! I'm sure you can do it!"

"Hng..."

He thought for a bit, then he finally reached his hand out to Maria.

"I-I, um... I am by no means trying to force this on you, but, if you wouldn't mind, I suggest that holding hands would materially aid in our strivings to avert unintended dissolution of our party as we traverse the crowd..."

I've seen tables less wooden than that...

Maybe another girl would have been put back by Cyrus's stiffness, but Maria was too kind to be bothered, and she also knew how nervous he was around girls.

"I would not mind that at all. Thank you," she responded,

taking Cyrus's hand and leaving him astounded.

"I think it would be wise for Lady Katarina to hold my other hand, would it not?" Maria then offered, extending me her free hand. I didn't mind, since by doing so I could avoid getting lost without interfering with those two.

"Thanks, Maria!" I took her hand.

Cyrus, still as nervous as could be, led us through and out of the crowd. We got far enough from the city's center that there weren't too many people around, and Cyrus quickly let go of Maria's hand, saying that we would be fine now.

"Thank you very much, Mister Cyrus," she said, making him blush once again.

Cyrus got one step closer to being a grown-up! Good for him! I thought before remembering that he was actually older than me.

I was busy watching my friend and my superior awkwardly interacting with each other, but I still noticed a familiar face out of the corner of my eye.

That's the kid I saw earlier while playing hide-and-seek at the orphanage, isn't it? I wonder if he's on an errand. Looks a bit too young for that though.

Before I had time to make heads or tails of it, the kid disappeared into a small back alley. During my mission at Ocean Harbor, I was taught that leaving the large, open streets for small, hidden ones was dangerous, as all kinds of bad people lurked there. This probably also applied to this town, and I started fearing for that kid. That being said, if I went after him by myself, far from being able to help, I would only make things worse, so I decided to get some help.

"Excuse me," I addressed Cyrus, who could probably manage to do something about it, "I just saw a child from the orphanage walk by himself into that dark alley."

"What? Are you sure it was one of the orphanage's kids?" he asked, surprised.

"I could be wrong, but I saw him back at the orphanage just earlier, so I'm pretty sure..."

"I see. But whatever the case, it's too dangerous for a kid to wander in a place like that by himself. I'll go check on him. You two wait here," he ordered, and ran toward the alley.

He can really be cool when he wants to... If only he wasn't so awkward with girls... I thought, looking at his back as he sped away

from us.

"I hope everything is fine..." Maria spoke, sounding concerned.

"Yes, I hope so too," I replied, and I started wondering what Maria actually thought of Cyrus.

Anyone with a pair of eyes could see that he was in love with her, but did that feeling go both ways? The problem with Maria was that she was so kind to everyone that you couldn't tell who she actually liked. After all, she didn't even fall in love with any of the romanceable characters at the academy from FL1, reaching a friendship-only ending instead.

Between her kindness, her beauty, and her strength, she was a perfect girl. Any man would fall for her. On the other hand, I never heard about her falling for anyone. Strangely, that also went for my other girl friends, Mary and Sophia. They liked talking about romance novels, but they almost never talked about any romance of their own. Even if I asked them if they liked anyone, they would just dodge the question by saying that they liked me a lot.

Could it be that they actually are in love with someone, but they don't want to tell me because I'm too naive to understand love?! I want to think that they would never do something like that... They probably wouldn't, but if they did, that'd make me so sad. M-Maria would never... Would she?

"Say, Maria..." I started to ask her, but then I felt someone run into me. "Ouch!" I shouted in surprise, and Maria immediately approached me to ask me if I was all right.

I took a look at the man who had just run into me. Judging by how burly he was, he was probably a manual laborer of some kind.

"Oh, s-sorry. I...didn't see you," he grunted, not sounding sorry in the slightest. From his red face, slurred speech, and alcohol stench, I could tell that he'd been enjoying some daytime drinking. A *lot* of daytime drinking, probably.

I thought that it was probably better to get away from this clearly drunk man, but four other men, equally burly and probably equally drunk, joined him. We were quickly surrounded by them.

"What's the deal? Huh? What's the problem? Hmm?"

This doesn't look good. We need to find a way out of this...

"Excuse me, but we have to go," I stated, trying to sneak in between two of them, but they quickly blocked my path.

"What's the hurry? Won't you two have a little chat with us?" one of them drawled. The smell of liquor got worse as soon as he

opened his mouth.

That's why I can't stand drunks...

"Now that I look at them, huh... These two are pretty, aren't they?"

"Hey, you're right! Pretty, yeah. Real pretty. Come and have some fun with us!" one of them leered, after taking a very good look at Maria's face.

She's pretty, yeah, and kind too. She is totally out of your league, I thought, taking Maria's hand.

"We're really in a hurry right now," I insisted, trying to get away once again.

"Don't run away like that. We're gentlemen, the whole lot of us. We wouldn't do anything bad to you, y'know?" one of them answered, grinning as he grabbed my arm.

"What are you doing?!" Maria shouted, even though I was the one who'd been grabbed. I could tell that she was trying to look angry, but no amount of frowning could make that beautiful face of hers scary.

"Aw, would you look at that! She's even cute when she's mad! I've never seen a girl this stinkin' cute!"

Not only had Maria's bluff not worked on them, but now one of the men had gone ahead and grabbed Maria's arm too.

"Now, be nice and spend some time with us," he smirked, getting uncomfortably close to her face.

I couldn't stand it. "Don't you dare touch Mar—"

Before I could tell him off, I saw Cyrus approaching the man from behind with a deadly cold stare.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked, loud enough to be heard over the five noisy men.

"And who are you?"

"Are these girls with you?"

All of them looked at him with contempt.

"Yes, they are. So take those filthy hands off of them," he commanded, his voice just as icy as his expressionless face.

"Huh? You think you can take all the girls to yourself and tell people what to do just because you're kinda handsome?"

The way the drunk man had said "handsome" made it clear that he hated Cyrus for it. However, even though he was handsome, he probably didn't look very strong to people who didn't know him. One of the men grabbed him by the lapel. The drunk probably

thought that he could easily win in a fight against Cyrus.

I had been relieved to see Cyrus come to our rescue, but I wondered whether he could use magic in a place like this. For the most part, only nobles could use magic, and I'd been taught that we weren't supposed to use it against commoners. But before I was done wondering about what to do, I noticed that the man that had grabbed Cyrus was lying on the ground facedown.

Wh-What happened?

I was confused, but the other men had clearly seen what Cyrus had done to their friend, and they all started shouting at him and running toward him, just for him to throw them to the ground one by one as if they were little kids.

Is this magic? It didn't look like he was using magic though...

Four of the men were already on the pavement, and only one was still standing. Cyrus, who hadn't even broken a sweat, fixed his gaze on the last drunkard.

"Are we done yet?" he inquired politely.

"E-Eek!" the man squeaked before taking a step backward. He clearly had no intention of challenging Cyrus anymore.

"You, take care of them," Cyrus ordered him, pointing at the four drunks on the ground. He then checked whether Maria and I were okay, and, since we were, he quickly dragged us away, as staying there would make us stand out too much.

"That just now wasn't magic, was it?" I casually inquired while we walked.

"What do you mean *that just now*?" he asked back, confused.

"The way you beat up those drunks, I mean."

"Oh, that? I guess you could call it a self-defense art. If you hit someone in the right spots, they won't be able to move for a while. It works on most people, even if they're very strong," he nonchalantly replied.

"R-Really? I never learned anything like this..."

I had learned the basics of sparring to protect myself from *Fortune Lover*'s bad ends, but I'd never even heard of this technique that Cyrus was talking about.

"Hmm, I learned how to use it back in my hometown. Maybe it's not common around these parts."

"You mean they taught that to you at home?" I gasped, surprised. Some noblemen learn how to use the sword as a fancy pastime, but street fighting like this was unheard of.

“Well, my family’s land is near the border with Xiarmah, you know. It’s a peaceful country, but we all learn how to defend ourselves just in case, both with a sword and with our bare hands.”

I see... They’re always preparing in case a war starts, basically.

Sorcié was at peace right now, but back at the academy I’d learned that this wasn’t always the case, and that, during wartime, nobles who lived near the borders would have to lead soldiers into battle. Since I was born and raised in the capital, far away from any border, I had just forgotten all about that.

“So you’re really strong, huh...” I remarked.

“As long as my opponent isn’t armed, I guess I can hold my own,” he conceded, but just like Maria, he had a habit of always being humble, so this probably meant that he’d never lose against anyone unless they had a weapon on them.

I knew that he was a powerful magic wielder, but realizing how strong he was with his hands came as a surprise. Despite the urgency of the situation, his movements during that little brawl were so beautiful that I could do nothing but stare at him.

So he’s handsome, smart, strong, and he’s even a department director at the Magical Ministry... He’s great. If only he could hold his own when faced with girls too, then he’d be perfect. So much wasted potential... I thought, staring at his face, and then he stopped walking all of a sudden. *Huh?! Why’d he stop all of a sudden? Could he read my thoughts just now?!* I panicked, but that didn’t turn out to be the case.

He entered a shop on the side of the street that we were walking on and spoke to someone inside. “Thank you for looking after him while I was away.”

“Oh, don’t mention it. And make sure you don’t get lost again, all right?” someone replied, and then Cyrus bowed and walked out, followed by a little kid. It was the kid I’d seen earlier—he had found him and brought him to safety.

“Is this the child you mentioned, Katarina?” he asked me.

“Yes, he is. Is he one of the orphanage’s?”

“He must be, since I saw him there earlier. He won’t say a word though,” he replied, looking distraught.

As for the kid, he wasn’t even looking at either of us, and he seemed annoyed to have been found by Cyrus.

“This girl right here,” Cyrus informed the boy, “saw you wander off by yourself, and had it not been for her, who knows what could have happened to you. You should thank her.”

The boy kept looking away from us without saying a word. *He didn’t get lost, did he? He was probably trying to run away…*

“Now, let’s go back to the orphanage before we run into any more trouble,” Cyrus declared.

“Nobody asked you to find me…” I heard the kid whisper. Just as I had thought, this probably meant that we’d caught him while he was trying to run away, but I couldn’t understand why. I wanted to ask him what he wanted to do all by himself, but as he walked by Cyrus’s side, he gave off a *don’t talk to me* aura so strong that I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

Hmm? What?

I stopped and looked around. I couldn’t see anything out of place.

“What is the matter, Lady Katarina?” Maria asked.

“I just felt as if we were being watched by someone…but I must have imagined it.”

I started walking again. Truth be told, I didn’t believe that I had imagined it. I had experienced the same feeling back at the Ministry before… I could feel that someone with bad intentions was staring at me, giving me goosebumps.

However, I didn’t want to scare Maria, who’d already had enough scary experiences for today, so I just walked as close to Cyrus as I could. After that, I didn’t feel watched anymore, and we safely reached the orphanage.

“We’re back,” I told one of the orphanage employees once we were inside.

The woman turned around to face us, making her ponytail sway in the air.

“Welcome ba… Liam!” she exclaimed, surprised. Liam must have been the boy that was with us.

She bowed apologetically to Cyrus and asked him where he’d found Liam.

“In a back alley near the city’s center,” he replied.

“Again…?” Sighing to herself, the woman held her head in her hands.

So, not only was Liam trying to run away, but today’s had not

even been his first attempt. The employee looked totally exasperated.

"I'm sorry, and thank you so much for bringing him back. I'll take care of him now, so please go to the kitchen. The children are all waiting for you," the woman said, snapping out of her moment of desperation.

I'd almost forgotten it with all that happened, but that's right. We were out to buy ingredients. But even if I went to the kitchen with Maria, I can't really help her cook. And I want to learn more about Liam too.

"Excuse me." I turned to the orphanage employee. "I was the one who saw him out there, and I also saw him walking by himself at the orphanage earlier on. I'm kinda worried about him, so I'd like to stay with him for a bit... May I?"

She looked surprised at my straightforward request, but then she smiled at me.

"I'm happy that you would care so much about one of our children. Unfortunately, however, I cannot give you permission myself. We'd need to ask the director. Would that be fine with you?"

"Of course," I replied.

I could see that Maria and Cyrus only looked slightly confused. On the other hand, Liam's cold stare betrayed just how much I annoyed him.

"Follow me then. I'll show you where her office is," she invited, and I followed her and Liam there.

"Miss Maggie, may we come in?"

"Sure, come inside," Maggie replied to us through the door, and we walked into her office.

"Oh? Now these are three people I didn't expect to visit me together." As she looked at us in surprise, the woman who was with us explained the situation.

"This girl," the woman then pointed at me, "would like to spend some time with Liam. May she?"

It all came down to Maggie's decision. If she said that I couldn't stay with Liam, I would have to give up.

"Oh?" Maggie looked me in the eye, and I returned her stare. After a while, she smiled at me.

"I'm sure it'll be fine if it's her. She has my permission."

"Thank you!" I said, bowing at her. I wasn't so sure about why she'd been convinced to give me permission just by staring at me,

but I was happy about it anyway.

Once that was out of the way, Maggie moved on to the main point of discussion on the agenda.

"Now, Liam," she began, looking at the boy, "do you know how many times you've tried running away already?"

He didn't reply. He just defiantly avoided her gaze.

"Three, Liam. Thankfully, this time our guests found you right away, but the other two times it didn't go so well, did it? Everyone in the orphanage had to look for you, and we even had to ask for help from the townspeople. I thought I had already told you more than enough times that you shouldn't do anything like this anymore."

So this was far from his first time trying to run away...

"Why are you doing this? Both other times you apologized and told us that you wouldn't do it anymore, but you didn't tell us what reason you had for doing it in the first place. Let me ask you the same thing I asked you before. Did anything bad happen to you here? I know that it can't be easy for you, since you just moved in from another country. If you'd just tell me, we could come up with a solution together. If the problem is that you can't get along with the other children, we can also think of transferring you to a different orphanage."

Maggie sounded calm and reassuring, but somehow still authoritative.

"Excuse me," I whispered to the orphanage employee standing next to me. "Liam is from another country?"

That part had caught my attention.

"Yes. A while back there was some trouble involving Ethenell at an international port, and he was rescued there."

"I see..." I replied nonchalantly, but I was actually shocked.

Could she be talking about the kidnapping incident that I was involved with?! That was trouble *all right.*

Cezar and the people at the Magical Ministry had made sure that the public wouldn't know about the kidnapping incident or the human trafficking, but obviously the rumors of some kind of nondescript "trouble" happening had already spread.

I don't remember seeing this kid... I wonder if he was there back then? But he doesn't seem to recognize me, and I heard that, apart from the ones I met, there were more kids who had been rescued, so he must have been one of them.

I was also surprised to learn that those kidnappers—*those scum*—didn't just snatch Sorcié kids, but children from other countries as well.

"I can't help you if you don't help me, Liam," Maggie spoke with quiet strength in her voice, but the boy didn't utter a word.

I could only imagine how sad it must have been for him, being kidnapped, sent into a different country, and then finding himself in an orphanage.

Then, I guess that there's only one solution...

"Do you want to go back to your country?" I asked.

Liam twitched as if he was startled, and then he stared at me with fire in his eyes. I had probably hit the nail on the head.

"Is that so, Liam? Do you want to go back there? But I heard that you were living by yourself in the slums there," Maggie asked him, looking at him with surprise, and the boy clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Yeah, I wanna go back to the slums. So what?"

"But what are you going to do there? Here you are safe, you have food to eat, clothes to wear, and a roof over your head," Maggie replied.

"I hate this prissy, boring country. It makes me sick."

"Liam..." The old woman furrowed her brow, not knowing what to say.

"I wanna go back. Lemme go home!" he shouted.

"But that would be too dangerous... You might not make it out safely this time around," Maggie tried to convince him, but to no avail.

"I wanna go! Lemme go!" he kept shouting.

"Excuse me..." I raised my hand, wanting to do something about this awkward situation.

The orphanage employee didn't look very pleased with that, as if it wasn't really a good time for me to talk, but Maggie gave me permission to speak.

"If he wants to go back to his country so badly... Can't you just let him go then?"

Liam, shocked, stared at me.

"Huh?! What are you talking about?!" the employee sputtered. "Send a child back to the slums?! Do you think you can just say whatever you want because you're not responsible for him like we are?!"

She was furious, but Maggie gestured for her to stop.

"What do you mean?" the director inquired. Both she and Liam were now staring at me.

"I mean exactly what I said. Just let him go back to his country."

"Y-You..." The employee was giving me the angriest of looks, but I was so used to being scolded that it barely registered.

"But," I continued, "he'd need to *prepare himself* first."

"Prepare myself?" he asked, confused.

"Yes. Here at the orphanage you can learn a lot of things that you couldn't learn in the slums," I explained, walking closer to him and crouching down to his eye level. "One of my friends is from the Ethenell slums, you know. Fortunately for him, when he was still a kid, he met a man from another country who taught him all kinds of things."

"The Ethenell slums...?" the boy repeated contemplatively. I could tell that I had his full attention; maybe his home country was Ethenell too.

"And my friend, he told me that this knowledge is what helped him survive. You see, Liam, knowledge is a weapon that you can't do without."

"Really?"

"Yes. He told me that on a battlefield you need a sword or a spear, but that in daily life you need knowledge. Sounds cool, doesn't it?" With a smile, I added, "So, if you want to go back, you are going to need a lot of knowledge. You can always go back after learning as much as you can here, right?"

He stared at me wordlessly, but I could tell that the light in his eyes had changed.

It took a while for the silence in the room to be broken by the sound of someone chuckling. I looked up and saw that it was Maggie.

"Ahahaha, I think we won't have any more problems now," she declared. She clapped her hands together, as if to place a period on that whole topic, and said, "Well, look at the time. We must go and help with preparing dinner."

She then led all three of us to the dining hall. Liam remained silent the whole time, and just stared at the floor instead of giving me any more angry looks.

Maggie, keeping her voice down so that only I could hear her,

thanked me. “Thank you, Lady Katarina. The rumors about you at the academy were true.”

I knew that she was aware of Cyrus’s identity, but it turned out she knew who I was as well.

But wait, what rumors is she talking about? Good ones? Bad ones?

I wanted to ask her, but she smiled at me and started walking faster, leaving me with no opportunity to do so.

★★★★★★

I, Cyrus Lanchester, was nervously walking toward the kitchen. The reason for my nervousness was that Maria Campbell, a girl I happened to like, was walking next to me.

Had this happened at work, where she also happened to be my subordinate, I would be so focused on my job that her proximity would not cause me any anxiety, but now, finding myself alone with her in my off time, I could barely stay calm. It wasn’t so bad while Katarina was with us, but, now that it was just the two of us, it was much worse. My own reaction made me feel pathetic.

That being said, interacting with Katarina on a regular basis had helped me get used to girls, if only in part. I had never told her, or anybody else, but at the start of my academy years, I was once invited to tea by a noble lady from the same class as me. I still hadn’t learned to hide my accent or to behave according to the local etiquette, and I had been thoroughly made fun of for it. That made my fear of girls even worse.

After that traumatic experience, I started assuming that all the girls living in the capital were refined and fashionable and that they had nothing but disdain for country folk like me. However, meeting someone as unique as Katarina made me realize that not everyone was like the noble ladies who had made fun of me. She had something about her that reminded me of the old ladies who worked on the fields back in my hometown, and that allowed me to talk with her without any problem.

But when it came to Maria, I seemed to be unable to get used to her company. I always became nervous. When I was around her, I couldn’t act in the same relaxed way as I did with Katarina. I definitely didn’t want to show Maria my less cool side.

Today, when we were out shopping and I saw a group of men harass Maria, I felt the angriest I had ever been in my whole life.

Seeing them touch her with their filthy hands, I wanted to scare them a little bit, so they'd leave her alone...but I ended up knocking out four of them.

She probably didn't notice it, but I went so hard on the one who dared lay his hand on her that he wouldn't be able to get back up for several hours. I considered myself a cool and collected individual, but, to my surprise, I wasn't immune to rage.

Up until recently, I thought of girls as alien creatures who only existed to make me miserable, and I never spoke with them outside of work, let alone thought of romancing one. I took this situation for granted, until, on that fateful day, I saw Maria's smile. I wasn't satisfied with things as they were anymore. I wanted to talk with her, get closer to her.

On the other hand, despite this desire of mine, even just breathing became a struggle when she was close to me.

I wish I could touch her. I couldn't possibly touch her. But I wish I could touch her...

I wasn't even sure of my own thoughts myself. Katarina, to thank me for teaching her about farming, made several attempts to help me out, but I didn't even have the courage to follow her lead. I wished I could start my life all over again.

That being said, today I made a step in the right direction. Heeding Katarina's instructions, I held Maria's hand. It was soft, much softer than I could have ever imagined.

I shall never wash this hand of mine again... No, that would be gross... But, if it's just for a few days...

"Excuse me, Mister Cyrus."

"U-Ugh! Yes?" I replied as I was startled out of my unsharable thoughts.

"That martial art that you used earlier... Do you think I would be able to use it too?"

"Oh, of course. Even women without much strength can use it."

"Then...would you teach it to me?" Maria asked, fiercely staring at me. I could tell just how serious she was.

"That may have looked easy, but I assure you it's not. Just being taught how it works isn't necessarily enough."

One needed to apply the correct amount of force to very specific spots in order for that technique to have any effect. Mastering it could be difficult. I asked her if she still wanted to learn it despite this, and she nodded in reply.

“My Light Magic is of no use in situations like the one we ran into today,” she explained.

“That may be true, but it was an exceptional situation. In general, you would always be around someone who could protect you. There is no need to learn to defend yourself to such an extent…”

Maria was a Wielder of Light, which already made her rare and valuable for our country. Furthermore, she was young and kindhearted. There was no shortage of men who would gladly protect her from any sort of trouble. And yet, she demurred.

“I don’t want to only be able to rely on others to protect me. I want to be able to protect those dear to me as well.”

The strength that radiated from her face as she spoke made her appear even more beautiful than usual.

Oh… My heart is racing…again.

I had believed that I was as infatuated with her as a man could possibly be, but this fighting spirit within her made me fall even deeper in love.

Who would have thought that, one day, I’d feel this way for a girl?

“As you wish. I will teach you in your spare time then,” I assented, having to muster all of my willpower to look away from those gorgeous eyes.

“Thank you so much,” she said, elated, and when I looked back at her, I was greeted by a smile too adorable for words to describe.

After that, my head went blank, and it stayed that way for quite a while.

★★★★★★

After eating dinner at the orphanage, it was time for us to leave. Since it was already late, Cyrus arranged for the carriages to carry each of us all the way to our homes. Jeord and Alan headed to the castle, Mary to her home, the Ascart siblings to theirs, Maria and Cyrus (who was once again riding with the coachman) to the Magical Ministry dormitories, and Keith and I to Claes Manor.

Everyone had told me about their day while we were eating dinner, and despite some of them initially saying that they wished they could have just played with the kids too, they all seemed to have had fun in the end.

Even after Nicol was relieved of his teaching duties, Jeord and

Keith continued helping the kids with their homework. Their little students said that they were even better than their teachers. That wasn't a surprise to me, considering how I had relied on those two to get through my Academy of Magic studies.

The same also applied to Mary and Sophia. The children were still asking questions well after their lesson time had ended. They both said that they enjoyed the opportunity to feel like an older sister for once.

I mostly talked about my games with the children, including the details about Alan and Nicol. I skipped most of the details about my shopping trip with Maria and Cyrus, just mentioning how crowded the town was because of the traveling entertainers.

I didn't want to make my friends worry by telling them of the incident with the drunks, and I still wasn't sure of what to make of Liam's story. I did end up telling Keith about him, however, after we had told everyone else goodbye and were riding home by ourselves.

"Why do you think he would want to go back to the slums rather than stay in the orphanage?" I asked my brother.

I had used Sora's words to persuade Liam, but I honestly still had no idea why he would want to go back to his home country in the first place. Back there, staying alive was already a struggle, while here he had three hot meals to eat every day without fail. The latter looked much better to me. I wanted to ask him directly, but he just had dinner by himself and then quickly went back to his room before I could do so. I noticed a hint of anxiety in his face that had me slightly worried.

"Hmm," Keith replied after thinking for a while, "maybe he misses his family and friends?"

"He supposedly doesn't have a family there, but maybe he did have friends," I agreed. That was certainly a possibility.

"But if it were me, if there were people I cared about who lived in a dangerous place, I'd have them come to safety rather than try to go back to them."

He was right—even if Liam did have any friends he was worried about, he wouldn't be able to help them just by going back. I still couldn't figure out that child's motivations. I thoughtfully cocked my head to one side.

Keith spoke up again. "I had a rough childhood, but it certainly wouldn't compare to living in the slums, so I'm afraid that I can't

really understand what goes through the head of someone who was raised there. Maybe you should ask someone who has that kind of past," he suggested.

"You're right! Thanks, Keith."

I decided that the next day, at work, I would ask Sora, who had actually lived in the slums.

As soon as I reached the Magical Ministry, I walked into the Magical Tool Laboratory. Newcomers like me and Sora came in early to prepare the office for the day.

"Good morning, Sora."

"Morning," he replied, stifling a yawn, and I lost no time in telling him about Liam.

"He's lucky enough to be in an orphanage and he wants to go back to the slums? Weird kid," was Sora's first reaction.

To be honest, I had to agree with him.

"I thought that maybe you'd understand him, since you also grew up there."

"Sure, I grew up in the same place, but I'm not him. I have no idea what goes through that kid's head. I'd be more than happy to stay in this safe, clean place rather than have to go back to that dump." He sounded proud of himself. It was the kind of thing that I expected him to say.

"Oh, right, I was also thinking that maybe he has some friends back in his home country, and he misses them. Do you think that'd make sense?"

"Hmm... It's not impossible, but then it'd make no sense to want to go back there by himself. If it were me, I'd get a grown-up to come along. Possibly one who's easy to talk into stuff," he mused, as if he was retracing the conversation Keith and I had yesterday.

Even someone like me, who was raised in Sorcié, away from all danger, realized that going back to the slums alone wouldn't be of much use, so there was no way that Liam, who grew up there, didn't understand it. But that meant that I didn't have the first clue about Liam's reason for wanting to go back home.

I suddenly remembered what he had said about life in Sorcié.

"You know, he said that this place is too 'prissy' for him. That it's boring here. Maybe, more than wanting to go back to the slums, he just doesn't like the orphanage..."

"Personally, I'd take a boring place over a dangerous one every

day of the week…" Sora's rebuttal was all the more persuasive coming from someone who had experienced life in the slums firsthand.

I realized that asking Sora was probably not going to help me, and my look must have betrayed that thought, since he added, "I'm not good with people's feelings and other delicate stuff like that. You'd do better to ask someone who is."

"And who would that be?"

"There happens to be someone like that right in our department, and you're going to get private lessons from him later today. Sounds like the perfect occasion to ask him," he responded, making it rather obvious who he was talking about.

"You mean Raphael?"

"Yeah. He's good at understanding people. If he weren't, he wouldn't be able to keep this department running despite Larna and all the other weirdos we have in here. You want to know what that kid feels like, right? Then Raphael's probably your guy."

I had never thought of it in that way, but what Sora had said made sense. Raphael had always been a people person, even back at the academy in the student council. It felt like he could read people's feelings and direct them accordingly, and he was doing something like that during the Dark Magic lessons with me too. He was always thinking of how to make them entertaining and avoid having them be too hard for me. And since I was going to have another lesson with him today, that was, just as Sora had said, the perfect occasion to ask him for some advice on Liam's situation. Thinking that Raphael was indeed my guy, I tried to finish the morning preparations in the office as fast as possible.

"Shall we start today's lesson?" Raphael asked after he walked in the room behind me.

"Actually, there's something I'd like to ask you before that," I answered, and I told him Liam's story.

I tried to give him as many details as possible, including how we had gone to the orphanage, how we had found him walking into a back alley while we were out shopping, and what he had told me in Maggie's office. There was a lot to explain, and I wasn't very good with words. I jumped around from one part of the story to the other, often forgetting to give enough context, but Raphael never interrupted me and listened carefully to everything I said.

“Prissy and boring, huh... Do you remember what his face looked like while he said that?”

“Yes. It didn’t seem like he was actually disgusted. He looked sad more than anything,” I replied.

That was what worried me so much. There was a weird contrast, a disconnect between what he said and the way he said it. I couldn’t ignore that if I wanted to.

“I see...” Raphael muttered to himself, before starting to silently think about what I had told him.

Even for someone like him, trying to understand the feelings of a child he had never met must have been no easy task. He also had a tendency to worry too much about everything, so I didn’t want to trouble him with extra stuff to think about.

I should take this matter in my own hands. I can’t rely so much on him.

“Actually, you know, you don’t nee—” I tried to tell him as much, but he actually started talking.

“I have never met this child, nor have I ever experienced life in the slums. Therefore, the best I can come up with is a hypothesis based on speculation. Would you still like to hear it?” he inquired, his brows lowered toward his eyes.

I nodded.

“Every once in a while—very rarely, truth to be told—I find myself overtaken by a sudden fear: the fear that out of the blue, the happy life I am living could be completely shattered.”

I was wondering why he would talk about himself to explain his ideas about Liam, but knowing that Raphael wouldn’t say something like that unless he had a good reason to, I kept listening.

“This is definitely because of what I have been through in the past. I lived happily with my mother until the Dieke family took all of that away, throwing me into despair. The only reason I had to stay alive was to find revenge. It was a living hell.”

Raphael’s beautiful face turned slightly darker.

“Until one day, I took the hand that you had offered me and found happiness once again. Now I am surrounded by people that I care about, in a place where I can smile and have them smile back at me.” He emphasized his point by giving me a feeble smile, gentle and sad, that reminded me of that day when I saw him cry so painfully.

He told us that he hated us, that he wanted us to go away, but

he cried as one who had been hurt. It felt like a very remote memory, but it had only been a few years since then. In that time he had been able to face his trauma, turn his life around, and get to the point where he could care and worry about other people. Raphael Wolt was truly an incredible human being.

"Despite this present happiness...I can't shake off the fear. The fear of losing it all, of having it taken away without a reason just like before. Because then, I wouldn't know what to do," he added quietly, turning his eyes down.

"I won't let anyone do that to you!" I shouted without really thinking about it. "If anyone tries to take this happiness away from you, I'll beat them right up!"

At first, he was surprised by my sudden shouting, but then he started chuckling.

"Thank you, Katarina. I'm happy that you would say that, but I'm not a kid anymore, and if somebody tried to threaten this life that I have built for myself, trust me...this time I'd fight back."

The confidence in his voice convinced me that there was no need to worry about him anymore.

"I can all say this because I'm an adult now," he continued, "but it's different for a child. One day you find a comfortable place for yourself, and the next you lose it because a grown-up has decided that that's how things should be."

"So, what you mean is..."

"That maybe this Liam child fears the same thing. That even if he were to find happiness, he would have no guarantee that he wouldn't lose it all of a sudden. Of course, it's possible that he doesn't even fully understand this himself since he's only a child. But I think that what drives him may be fear of loss, rather than hate."

Not hate, but fear of losing the happiness that he's found. That was only Raphael's hypothesis, but what Liam said and did that day, and the look on his face... It all seemed to make sense.

"I think you could be right, Raphael. I'll try to talk to him about that the next time I see him."

"Please do. And if he really is scared..."

"Yes? What should I do?"

"Please tell him that it's fine to take the hands of those who reach out to you. Tell him that it's fine to reach out to others for help too. Tell him that there's always someone who will go through

life together with him." He smiled at me kindly. The sheer beauty of that smile made me understand why everyone was crazy about him.

Asking him for help was the right thing to do!

I fanned my face with my hand, trying to cool off the heat that Raphael's handsomeness had caused.

"Still, it's incredible that you'd be able to theorize so much just from what I told you," I complimented him.

"It's just that the things he said reminded me of my own feelings," he calmly explained. He then mentioned that, if I managed to talk with Liam again, I could ask him for more advice. "Oh, right," he added, trying to bring our discussion of Liam and his situation to a conclusion, "parting with the happiness that you've grown accustomed to is dreadful. But..."

Chapter 5: Back to the Orphanage

Life went on as usual at the Magical Ministry (the only notable change was that Maria had started taking self-defense lessons from Cyrus), and very soon it was time for Cyrus to go to the orphanage again to deliver his vegetables. He told me that he didn't need any help, since the quantity wasn't as great as last time, but I insisted on going with him, because I wanted to know what Liam had been up to.

This time, since it was only going to be the two of us, going to the orphanage wouldn't be that big of a deal...or so I thought.

"What's this? It was supposed to just be the two of us this time around!" Cyrus asked me, lowering his voice.

"W-Well, you see..."

I hadn't told him about it, but Keith had somehow managed to learn that I was going to the orphanage through the Claes family's powerful information network, and decided that he would come along too. Mother, as usual, agreed with him that it was better not to let me go by myself. Of course, being alongside my brother made me feel safer too, so I didn't mind that much. I only wondered if it was fine to have him come with me on his free days so often, considering how busy he usually was, but according to him, that wasn't a problem at all.

Then, for reasons that I really had no idea about, Jeord had somehow managed to find out about the whole thing and joined the expedition. I was honestly, genuinely stunned. He just casually turned up uninvited, got on the carriage, told me good morning, and started chatting as if it was the most natural thing in the world. So I gave up and stopped trying to think about it.

Jeord is just mysterious like that...

And that's why, this time, it would be me, Cyrus, Keith, and Jeord going to the orphanage. At first, Cyrus complained about how this was different from his plans, but since at least he didn't have to be around girls like last time, he quickly figured that it didn't matter all that much. Since there were only four of us, we all fit

inside a single carriage, and loading the vegetables didn't take much time either. Once that was done, we started riding to the orphanage for the second time in a few days.

"You must forgive me, but I really must voice my surprise at the extent of your information network," Keith told Jeord once we were seated on the carriage. "How did you come to know of today's outing?"

My brother's voice sounded somewhat harsh as he talked to the prince. During the trip from Claes Manor to the Magical Ministry, Jeord's sudden appearance still had us so surprised that he was in total control of the conversation, and Keith hadn't managed to ask him about that yet. To be honest, I was wondering the same thing.

"Information network? Oh, Keith, it is only through my love for Katarina that I was able to find this out. One look at her was enough to make me realize that she was probably going to the orphanage again on her next free day. All I had to do was to check when her next free day was going to be and wait in front of Claes Manor in the morning."

He read me like a book! He's incredible!

"You are probably trying to make it sound romantic, but what you are doing here is stalking, which is a crime."

"Please, do not use such words to describe the pure love I have for my fiancée."

"She may be your fiancée *now,* yes. But not for long."

"I must agree with you. She will soon cease to be my fiancée and turn into my wife."

"That is definitely not what I meant."

"You may also call me Big Brother if you so desire, Keith."

"I have absolutely no intention or plan of calling you that. Just so you know."

Keith and Jeord always looked like they were having so much fun chatting—since they were kids, their back-and-forths were always so quick and intense. Being so busy as of late, they hadn't had many chances to talk to each other like this, so I decided not to intrude, and spoke with Cyrus instead.

"Has there been any news from the orphanage?" I asked him. I thought it'd be uncouth to ask him directly about Liam.

"Are you talking about that kid who was running away? Since you looked so worried, I asked about him in a letter, and they told me that he's been behaving since we last met," Cyrus replied,

immediately guessing what I was getting at.

"Oh, I see. Thank you for doing that."

I was relieved to know that he hadn't tried escaping again, and I hoped that I would have the chance to talk to him once more when I reached the orphanage.

"I must say though, you're a really weird girl. Why'd you take so much interest in a kid you've only met once?"

"He just looked like he needed someone to watch over him... I thought that it'd be dangerous to leave him alone," I replied, thinking that what I was doing wasn't particularly weird. I wasn't sure exactly how or why leaving Liam to his own devices would be dangerous, but I just couldn't shake off the feeling.

"You know," Cyrus replied, chuckling, "Maria's description of you was really on point. Oh, everything she says about you she means as a compliment, of course. She really, really likes you. You're the only topic she's ever talking about."

"I see... Oh, lately you've had more chances to be alone with her, right? Since you've been teaching her self-defense. Were you able to make any progress?"

Maria had asked Cyrus to give her lessons in the martial arts from his hometown, and she would sneak off to attend these as soon as she had some free time. Since she was keeping the whole thing a secret, I could imagine that Dewey and the others must have been perplexed about where she was going so often, probably thinking that it was some kind of secret rendezvous.

"P-Progress...? W-Well, Maria's smart, so she learns fast..."

Even now that he'd gotten closer to her, and could even survive spending time alone with her, he seemed to behave in much the same way as before. One time I took a peek to see how the lessons he was giving Maria were going, but I was disappointed to find out that he was just teaching her self-defense without using that perfect opportunity to do anything more than that. Even so, I was happy to know that they were chatting about other things, as Cyrus had just informed me.

"By the way, where is Maria working today?" I asked. Not everyone's free days at the Ministry coincided, and Maria told me that she was going on a mission.

"Oh, she's on a mission in another town close to the orphanage. If she finishes early, she promised that she would come by to say hello," Cyrus explained.

“Really? That’d be wonderful!”

“Yes,” he agreed, surprisingly honest.

Whenever he was talking about Maria, Cyrus always looked happy. Seeing love as pure and intense as that made me think that maybe, after putting doom behind me, I wanted to give romance a shot too.

The carriage eventually reached the orphanage.

“Thank you for coming here again so soon. The children are very excited to see you,” Maggie, the director, greeted us at the entrance.

After carrying the vegetables, of which there weren’t many, inside the building, I started playing with the kids, just like last time. And, just like last time, Jeord and Keith were almost forced to help them with their homework.

It hadn’t been very long since the last time they saw me, so the children still remembered me and were happy to approach me. When I replied to their inquiries about “the cool big misters” (Alan and Nicol) by telling them that they weren’t there today, the children were clearly disappointed. I was only a little bit saddened by their reaction.

We played tag. After playing with them for so long last time, I’d gotten much better at catching them. Practice really makes perfect.

I wanted to talk to Liam, but like the other children his age, he was busy studying. I thought that I would go and look for him whenever the children that I was playing with took a break for snack time. However, while playing hide-and-seek, thanks to my perfect eyesight, I saw a kid walking by himself in the distance...and he was going toward the orphanage’s exit!

“Hey! Where are you going?!” I shouted, but instead of stopping, Liam started walking faster.

I started running, and upon noticing this, he started running too.

Think you can beat me? I’m an adult!

As it turned out, kids have a lot more energy than adults do. I got very close to catching him, but I didn’t manage to. I eventually tripped and fell down face-first with a sound so loud that I scared the birds off all the trees in the vicinity.

O-Ouch... Look at me, an adult, tripping like that... This is so embarrassing. I don’t want to get up...

But I had to get up, so I did. My face still stung. When I looked

up, I saw Liam, staring at me with his mouth open in surprise. Well, I guess falling down was worth it after all. I quickly reached toward Liam and hugged him so that he couldn't escape.

"I finally got you!" I crowed, unable to restrain my glee.

"What's your problem?" he asked, looking annoyed as he tried to struggle free.

"I can't just leave you alone like this!" I replied, and his expression grew even more annoyed.

"I don't need the sympathy of a well-off girl!" he shouted at me. His little fists were shaking.

"Why are you trying to run away?"

"I already told you. It's prissy and boring! I hate it!"

Hmm, no way. That's not *the tone of someone who hates something...*

"Are you scared?" I asked.

He swayed wildly between my arms. Raphael was probably right.

"Are you scared," I continued, "that if you found happiness at the orphanage, then you could suddenly lose it? Is that why you want to go away before getting to like it?"

The annoyance in his face changed to pain, and tears started flowing from his beautiful eyes.

"What would you know? What would you people know? You don't know me! You can't know how I feel! You people have always lived your boring, peaceful lives! You don't know what it's like to have your parents and brothers killed by bandits and have to live like an animal in the slums!"

An animal—that is what he sounded like. A hurt, dying animal crying for help. I could almost see his fur bristling on his body. Seeing him in so much pain made me sad for him, and I hugged him harder.

"Stop it! Leave me alone!" He struggled, but I didn't let go.

"You're right, I wouldn't know. I've always lived here, in this peaceful place. I don't know anything about violence and hardship...but that doesn't mean that I can't be on your side. Both me and all the people in the orphanage. We're on your side, Liam. Even if we don't know about your past, we can try to understand. If you just reach out your hand, we'll take it."

I paused and looked him straight in the eye.

"Don't be scared. Just reach out to us," I pleaded, and Liam

started crying even harder. His tears told me that he wouldn't try to run away anymore. It was as if all his strength had left him at once.

He's just a kid, but he was trying so hard...

I kept hugging him, patting him on the head.

Raphael really is incredible. He immediately understood what Liam's problem was, and also what I had to tell him to help. Oh, right. I have to tell him that...

"Liam, parting with the happiness that you've grown accustomed to is dreadful, but the memory of that happiness will give you the strength to fight through anything. So, I want you to be happy at the orphanage. I'm sure the happiness you can find here will make you stronger."

Finally, Liam hugged me back. I stroked his back until he stopped crying, knowing that he had finally accepted what I had told him.

★★★★★

"Everything's going to be fine, Liam."

I still remember how my sister hugged me back then, trying to stop my shaking.

The bandits came into our little village during the night, barging inside our home. They killed everyone. Dad was killed trying to protect us, mom was killed trying to make us kids run away, and then my brother was killed while trying to save my sister and me.

She and I were hiding in a tiny old hut near the border of the village. I was hiding inside her arms.

The bandits had set almost the whole village on fire, and I was scared that the hut would burn too, or that they'd find us and kill us. I could do nothing but try to make myself as small as possible, ignoring all the screams and cries from outside.

I don't know how much time passed, but it felt like forever. Eventually, the cries stopped, and everything went silent. The sun rose, and my sister and I slowly walked out into its light. There was no village anymore. There was only ash and black debris everywhere. Everyone was dead.

I held her hand as tightly as I could, and it felt cold. I looked up at her as she smiled, falling on her knees and then falling down to the ground. It was then that I saw the arrow stuck inside her

shoulder. There was a lot of dried-up blood below the arrow. She must have been shot while we were running away, but she didn't tell me so that I wouldn't be scared.

"Sis!"

I called for her, but she only heaved painfully.

"Liam... Live..."

Those were her last words. She died, and it was as if everything went dark. I don't remember what happened next. Maybe I ran away by myself, maybe someone brought me there... But after that I was an orphan living in the slums.

I had to rummage through the trash to find food, and sometimes an angry adult would beat me up just because he felt like it. My family had always been poor, but life with them seemed so sweet. I wanted to go back to those days.

One day, after being beaten up so badly that I threw up, I was sitting in the rain, thinking that I didn't want to live anymore...but then I remembered my sister's final request. I couldn't die. I had to live.

I crawled and struggled, finding whatever food I could, trying my best to survive. After some time, I was kidnapped and thrown onto a ship that brought me to a place I didn't know. In that tiny room, with all the other kidnapped children being kept with me, I thought that this time I was going to die for real.

Then, all of a sudden, a bunch of adults in nice clothes walked in, told us that everything would be all right, and brought us to a clean, beautiful building. They asked me a lot of questions. *"What's your name?" "Where were you born?" "Where are your parents?"*

I'm Liam. I was born in a village in Ethenell. My parents were killed, and the rest of my family too. I was living by myself in the slums.

It felt like being surrounded by fog, but I answered them. They told me that I wasn't in Ethenell anymore, but in a country called Sorcié, across the sea. Since I had no house or family to go back to, they brought me to some place called an "orphanage." I didn't know what kind of place it would be, but I hoped that nobody would try to kill me there.

This "orphanage" place looked nothing like I thought it would. "I'm Maggie, and I run this orphanage. Nice to meet you, Liam," an old lady greeted me.

She looked like an old lady I knew back in my village. For some reason, when she offered me her hand, I got the chills. I didn't

shake it. She looked surprised and a bit concerned, but she didn't get mad at me or hit me. She just smiled. I didn't know why, but I was scared. I ran away from her.

After that, the other people at the orphanage would talk to me, or smile at me. Every single time, I felt a pain in my chest, and I ran away from them. As long as I stayed there, I had food to eat and a place to sleep. It was nothing like living in the slums; it was more like when I lived with my family.

But the more time I spent there, the more the memories of when the bandits attacked came back to me. I remembered how they killed my family. I remembered how my sister lay lifeless on the ground. The memories had never come back while I was in the slums, but here they kept hurting me. I didn't want to be there anymore. I felt weird.

So I ran away from the orphanage. I wanted to go back to the slums. Even if I didn't go back to Ethenell, they probably had slums in this country too. I thought I could go there and live like an animal, like I used to, so that the memories wouldn't hurt me anymore. But I didn't know the place well enough to get away, so I was found and brought back to the orphanage by some people who thought they were doing me a favor. Not just once. Twice.

I made up some excuses so that the director would leave me alone, and she believed me, thinking that I was probably just confused because of the new surroundings. I tried a third time, but I was brought back by some people who didn't even work for the orphanage! That was the *worst*. I feared that I might not get another chance to run away, at least not easily.

They brought me to the director's office, like the other two times. This time, however, there was a weird girl with us. She'd come to the orphanage to bring us vegetables or something, and she looked all clean and pretty, like someone from a totally different world than mine. That was enough to make me hate her.

Maggie asked me if I knew how many times I'd tried running away.

Of course I do. Just leave me alone.

She went on to tell me that everyone was worried about me. That made me feel weird. Then she asked me if I had some kind of trouble with this orphanage and wanted to go to another one...

She doesn't get it. Nobody here gets it. They could never understand me.

“I can’t help you if you don’t help me, Liam.”

You can’t help me anyway, I thought, but I didn’t say anything.

And then, that weird girl spoke.

“Do you want to go back to your country?” she asked. I was surprised. This had been the closest that anyone had ever gotten to understanding.

I glared at her, but she didn’t seem to care. She just stared back at me.

“Is that so, Liam?” Maggie asked me. “But what are you going to do there? Here you are safe, you have food to eat, clothes to wear, and a roof over your head.”

I know that, but…

“I hate this prissy, boring country. It makes me sick,” I exploded. I told her what I’d kept inside me for so long.

I want to go back to the slums! I want to go back to living like an animal!

She tried to reason with me, but I didn’t listen to anything she said.

I want to go back. I will! I have to!

“Can’t you just let him go then?” I heard someone say. It was that weird girl, who was looking at me again.

The orphanage employee who was with us started yelling, but I was just looking at the girl.

“Just let him go back to his country,” she continued.

But she just stopped me from running away… Now she wants to help me?

“But he’d need to *prepare himself* first… Here you can learn a lot of things that you couldn’t learn in the slums,” she told me, moving closer. Her eyes were clear and blue.

“One of my friends is from the Ethenell slums, you know.”

The Ethenell slums? But that’s where I used to live…

“And my friend, he told me that this knowledge is what helped him survive. You see, Liam, knowledge is a weapon that you can’t do without.”

A weapon? Wouldn’t that be like a sword, or something else that you can use to hit people?

“Yes. He told me that on a battlefield you need a sword or a spear, but that in daily life you need knowledge. Sounds cool, doesn’t it?” she told me, smiling.

I’d never thought of it like that. Knowledge could help me

survive, and I needed to survive. So, even though being here made me hurt so much, I had to stick it out and learn as much as I could. Before then, the only thing that I thought of was going back to the slums. Now, for the first time, I was starting to doubt myself.

I tried doing as that girl said and studying. I was put in the same class as the smallest kids, since I didn't know how to read. Studying was interesting, and I actually liked it. And when they saw me studying, the teachers told me that I was being a very good boy. Everyone was so warm, so kind...just like back in the village.

A few days later, when we didn't have any classes, we were told that some guests would be coming to the orphanage to help us with homework. I took my textbook and started walking toward the classroom. All of a sudden, I heard a loud crash. One of the orphanage employees had dropped a vase on the floor while cleaning, and it had broken.

"Ugh... It's in pieces, and... Ouch... I even cut my hand," she groaned. I saw the blood flowing from one of her fingers.

The memory of my sister's bloody shoulder resurfaced. Just a few hours before that I had been having dinner with my family—I had been having fun. My brother even gave my sister and me some of his share, even though it wasn't much to begin with. We were poor, but we enjoyed talking to each other about our days and then going to sleep, ready to give our best the next morning. But it only took a moment for all of that to end.

Before I knew it, I was running away from the orphanage again. I didn't even know where I wanted to go. I just wanted to run. And then, that weird girl from before called out to me. I didn't understand why she was there, but I had no time to think. I didn't want her to catch me, so I ran as fast as I could. I put one foot in front of the other, trying to get as far away as possible. I heard a huge noise behind me. It surprised me so much that I had to look back, and I saw that girl laying facedown on the ground.

What is going on?

I was so confused that I couldn't think of running away anymore. I just stared at the weird girl. Then, out of the blue, she got up and caught me between her arms. She had a scary grin on her face. I didn't get it. Why was she always sticking her nose into my business, talking about knowledge and stuff? I tried to get away from her, but she wouldn't let me go. She was a weird girl, but she was wearing good clothes and she looked pretty. She must have

been rich or something.

She asked me why I ran away, and I told her what I told Maggie. *It's true. I hate this place... It makes me feel weird.*

"Are you scared?"

Scared?

Those words pierced through me and hit me straight in my heart.

Am I...scared?

I'd never thought about it...but it sounded right.

"Are you scared that if you found happiness at the orphanage, then you could suddenly lose it? Is that why you want to go away before getting to like it?"

Losing my happiness was scary. I finally realized what that weird feeling was. Fear. All I had was stolen from me in the blink of an eye, and I couldn't do anything. Even if I managed to find happiness here, that could happen again.

So this is why I felt this way... But she wouldn't know. None of them would know.

I shouted at the girl with all the force I had in me. She didn't know how it felt to lose what I had lost, to live through what I had lived through.

You have never lost anything in your life!

That was the last resistance I could put up. I risked finding happiness in this place where nobody understood me, and that was scary. That was sad. I couldn't think straight anymore. The girl was holding onto me even stronger now.

"You're right, I wouldn't know. I've always lived here, in this peaceful place. I don't know anything about violence and hardship..."

That's right! You don't! So leave me alone!

"But that doesn't mean that I can't be on your side. Both me and all the people in the orphanage. We're on your side, Liam. Even if we don't know about your past, we can try to understand. If you just reach out your hand, we'll take it."

Try to understand? Be on my side? Take my hand? Her words kept swirling around in my head. She looked straight at me with her clear blue eyes.

I was so scared of losing what I had that I ran away from everyone who tried to take my hand and help me out. Those hands that reached out to me, kind and warm like none had ever been in

the slums. I was too scared to take them...but I wanted to. I wanted someone to hold me like my family used to.

I was so scared.

I felt something snap inside of me, and I started crying. I wasn't so sure, but maybe, the day that my family was killed, I hadn't cried. I had never cried since then. I was too busy finding out what I had to do. But now, years later, I could let myself go in this girl's warm hug. I didn't have to worry so much just to survive anymore. Now I could cry.

"I'm sure the happiness you can find here will make you stronger."

She's right. The happy memories with my family were what kept me going in the slums.

I hugged her, and she started stroking my back, kindly, just like my sister had done years ago.

Chapter 6: Dark Magic

It took a while for Liam's tears to stop, maybe because he had been keeping them inside for a long time. His nose was bright red, probably from blushing, and when I let him go, he immediately looked away. He was still acting the same, but somehow he didn't look as bitter as before.

"Let's go back." I offered him my hand, which he cautiously took.

We started walking back to the orphanage, holding hands. Even though we had been running so fast, we had done it for such a short time that we hadn't gotten all that far.

"What's your name anyway?" Liam asked me bluntly.

"I'm Katarina. I plan to visit the orphanage again when I have the time, so let's be friends, okay?"

"Hm-mm." He nodded.

I was so happy seeing him answer like that, especially when compared to the annoyed looks he used to give me, that I felt the need to pat his head.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" he squeaked, blushing and trying to push my hand away.

That's so cute, I thought, grinning to myself, when I heard a voice.

"You two seem to be having fun."

Someone was standing in front of us, but I couldn't tell who it was because they were wearing a hood that covered most of their face.

Who's this? A friend of Liam's?

The person in the hood slowly walked toward us before pulling her hood back and showing us her smiling face.

"It's been a while, Katarina Claes," she spoke.

It was a black-haired girl who looked familiar. *She was in the mansion where Keith was held after being kidnapped!*

"I know you! You—"

"I'm glad you remember me," she interrupted, smiling again.

She didn't look like she wanted to harm us, but Larna had warned me that this girl was a dangerous Wielder of Darkness who didn't think twice about hurting people. After all, Keith's life was endangered because of her. I moved in front of Liam, shielding him from her.

"Aw, you're scared of me? That makes me sad," she claimed, but her lips were still curled in the same creepily unchanging smile.

"What do you want?" I asked her while taking a step back.

"I actually have some business with that boy there." She pointed at Liam.

She wants to do something to him?! He can't stay here then! It's too dangerous!

"Liam. Run to the orphanage," I told him as he stood behind me.

"But..." He hesitated, probably understanding that something was off.

"You're a fast runner. I want you to run there and find the man called Cyrus. He's one of the people who came with me to the orphanage. Can you ask him to come here? Please." I smiled while pleading with him, trying not to scare him, and he quickly nodded and started running.

"Oh my," the girl chirped, looking at him getting farther away, but I stood in front of her.

"I won't let you touch him." I stared at her as angrily as I could. I didn't really think that I could win in a fight against her, since she could use Dark Magic much better than me, but at least I could hope to buy myself time until Cyrus, who actually stood a chance, got here.

“Now, now, there’s no need to look at me like that. I’m not going to do anything to that child anymore.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused. *Didn’t she just say she had business with him?*

“There’s no more darkness in his eyes.” That made even less sense to me.

“Say what?”

“How can I put this? It’s as if he was relieved of the dark burden he was carrying. And it’s your fault. Again.”

“My fault?!”

What is this girl trying to say?!

“Why are you always in my way? You even stole the Dark Covenant…” she complained, raising her eyebrows slightly but otherwise still smiling as usual.

“I didn’t steal it! I didn’t even want it in the first…” I started, but then the shock registered. “How do *you* know about the Dark Covenant?!”

Only the Ministry higher-ups and some of the people closest to me were supposed to know about that.

“I know everything. I even know how hard you are training in Dark Magic right now.”

“Huh?!”

Only a handful of people know about that, and I’ve only been taking Dark Magic lessons for a few days… I don’t understand. How can she know that? Who is she?

I felt fear overtake me, and I took another step backwards. Her expression, again, didn’t change one bit. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

Can I make a run for it? I have no choice either way. I quickly made up my mind, turned around, and started running toward the orphanage.

“I wasn’t done talking. If you’re going to hinder me so much, you could at least show some manners. Maybe I will punish you a little bit,” I heard her call from behind.

I could tell that something was chasing after me—something bad. I didn’t have time to look back to see what it was, but somehow I *felt* that getting caught wouldn’t be good news. I started running even faster, as fast as I could, and then I noticed someone

running toward me. Two people I knew well.

I just need to reach them, and I'll be safe, I thought, mustering all the strength I had left in my legs, but...

"Got you," the hooded girl somehow whispered directly into my ear. Moments later, a black fog had enveloped me.

"Katarina!"

"Big Sister!"

The two's screams sounded distant and muffled.

The darkness surrounding me was so scary that I instinctively closed my eyes. Soon after, everything went silent. I couldn't even hear the birds and bugs in the trees all around me. It was so silent that it made my ears hurt.

I opened my eyes back up, still scared, but everything was so dark that it didn't make a difference. There was nothing there, no matter how much I looked around. Or maybe there was, but I couldn't see it because it was so dark. I couldn't even see my own arms and legs after all. I tried touching my face, and I realized that I could still move my hands and feel things. But, blinded like that, moving around would be too dangerous.

Where am I? It must be that girl's doing. What did she do to me? Was I sent to another dimension, like when I accidentally got the Dark Covenant? I don't know. Maybe it's something else.

I couldn't hear or see anything. I was surrounded in terrifyingly silent darkness. Not knowing what was going on was scary, but what was even scarier was not knowing when it would be over.

"I'm scared..." I mumbled to myself.

"Katarina!"

"Big Sister!"

I heard two voices calling out to me.

"Jeord? Keith? Are you two there?"

"Yes. I cannot see my surroundings, but I can tell that I am close to you," Jeord responded.

"Judging by your voice, we can't be that far away," Keith concurred.

"So you two are trapped in darkness too?" I asked. For a second I had thought that it was just me who couldn't see, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"I definitely am."

"I can't see anything either."

So all three of us were stuck in this dark thing. “But why would you two be here too?” I asked them. I remembered them running toward me, but they still hadn’t reached me when all went black.

“I saw a dark fog engulf you from behind, and I jumped toward you to pull you out of it. A moment later, I found myself here.”

“The same happened to me.”

I knew that they couldn’t see me, but I bowed apologetically as I told them that I was sorry to have got them into trouble.

“I am the one who should apologize for not being able to protect you, Katarina.”

“He’s right. And we were so close too... Sorry, Big Sister.”

“Thank you both,” I replied to their kind words.

“Anyway,” Jeord spoke again, “I believe it would be better to concentrate on how to get out of here now.”

Keith and I immediately agreed with him.

“First of all, what is *here?* I can feel my own body, so it’s not just our consciousness being transported to a different place,” Keith said.

“Indeed. It is likely that we were physically transported into this dark place,” Jeord answered.

“I wonder if we can touch each other.”

“If we could, that would prove that we really are in the same place. We should try,” Keith replied.

“I’ll try getting closer to you and touching you then. Keep talking, Keith.”

“What?! Closer?! Is that safe?! And touch me where, anyway?!” Keith kept speaking, just as I had asked him to.

I trod through the darkness to find him. Now that I knew that those two were there with me, moving around wasn’t so scary anymore. After taking a few steps, I felt something make contact with my hand.

“Keith?”

“Big Sister?”

Keith’s voice was coming from really close by.

“Oh! I managed to touch you, Keith!” I exclaimed, patting him all over his body.

“Wh-What are you touching?!” he asked me.

“Hmm? What *did* I touch?”

“Never mind! Just stop it! Give me your hand now,” he demanded curtly, taking my hand before I could even reply.

His hand was larger and stronger than I remembered, but I could tell that it was Keith's, and that made me feel safe and relieved.

"You two sound like you are having the best of times. May I ask what exactly you are up to?" Jeord asked. I was surprised by hearing his voice, since it sounded like it was very close to us.

"Wait! You're not that far away!" I called.

"I walked toward you while hearing your banter. Feel free to touch me as well, Katarina."

"But I can't see you, so I don't know where you are..." I replied.

"Oh, of course. So, give me your ha— No, Keith, not you. Why would you take my hand? Let it go."

I didn't know what was more impressive: that Keith had managed to take Jeord's hand, or that Jeord had immediately realized who it was.

"I can't trust that you wouldn't take advantage of this darkness to touch my sister in inappropriate ways."

"The only one behaving inappropriately here is you, Keith. Where did you have her touch you?"

"I did not ask her to do it. She just did it of her own accord..."

"Interesting. And *where* did you make her touch you then?"

"I just said that I didn't make her..."

These two are always like this, huh. Not even being trapped in this absurd situation can stop them from bickering, I thought, and I couldn't stop myself from laughing out loud.

"What is wrong, Katarina?"

"Why are you laughing, Big Sister?"

"It's just so funny that you two would act like this even now!" I explained, continuing to laugh for quite some time. I couldn't see them, but I was sure that they must have looked pretty annoyed.

After the laughter subsided, I realized that, suddenly, I wasn't scared at all anymore.

"Okay. Let's think of how to get out of here," I said, feeling that I had gotten my cool back. I also took Jeord's hand in my left hand, and Keith's in my right.

"Since we can touch each other, I think it's safe to assume that we are all together, physically, in an actual dark place," Keith reasoned.

"Yes. We are not just mentally connected while being physically apart," Jeord agreed.

"That girl must have sent us here with her Dark Magic!"

After all, a pitch-black space just screamed "Dark Magic," didn't it?

"The kid that told us about you explained that there was a hooded girl with you. Is that who you are talking about?" Jeord asked.

"The kid? That must be Liam! I'm glad he got to the orphanage safely!"

"Yes," Keith explained, "he rushed into the building, telling us that you had run into a scary hooded girl and were probably in danger. He asked us to go and help you out."

"He did all that? What a good boy!"

Thank you, Liam.

"We came for you as soon as we heard that, and we saw you being chased by a dark fog."

"I see... And that girl wasn't behind me then?"

"Not at all. There was nothing there except for you, Big Sister."

"That's weird. I heard her whisper into my ear just before the fog surrounded me."

"Maybe that was part of her Dark Magic spell. Dark Magic is still a mystery to us for the most part."

"I guess so, yeah..."

Which is why the bigwigs at the Ministry want me to study Dark Magic and learn more about the covenant... Unfortunately, all I've been able to do so far was conjure a teeny tiny bubble of darkness and make it disappear. I have nothing on that hooded girl. She completely surrounded us with darkness! Hmm... Now that I think of it, could this *darkness be made of the same stuff that I learned to make? Raphael told me that he was able to make a whole room go dark. If that's true, then maybe I could make it disappear, even if I'm not good enough to conjure it up myself.*

"Actually... There's this Dark Magic spell I've been practicing that makes darkness appear and disappear, so...I want to try using it," I announced, letting go of their hands.

"Be careful, Katarina."

"Stop as soon as you feel it's getting dangerous, Big Sister."

"Thank you. I will."

I thought back to my lessons with Raphael. *First of all, I need to visualize the skull wand...*

I was scared that not being able to see anything would make it

impossible, but thankfully, I soon felt the wand appear in my hand.

Okay. Now I just need to make the darkness disappear like I do while practicing...

"Haaah!" I flicked the wand and saw a tiny white dot appear in front of me. It was just the opposite of when I'd summoned darkness.

This is a good start! I need it to make all of it disappear though!

"Haaah!" I flicked the wand again, and the tiny white dot started sucking up the darkness like some kind of super powerful vacuum cleaner. It was so intense that I was scared we'd end up being sucked in too, but thankfully that didn't happen. The dot kept absorbing the darkness until our surroundings got so bright that I had to squeeze my eyes closed. At the same time, I started hearing the cries of bugs and birds again.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Jeord and Keith standing in front of me where the dark fog had been.

"We made it back," I rejoiced, feeling so exhausted that the two boys had to keep me from falling over.

As I thanked them, I heard a voice call my name from behind me. I turned around and saw two familiar faces.

"Oh, Mister Cyrus. And Liam too." Before I was even done finishing my sentence, Liam had already sprinted toward me, hugging me.

"Huh? Liam...?" I asked him, surprised.

"This boy warned us that you were in danger," Cyrus explained. "Prince Jeord and Master Keith immediately started running here, and I followed them. I told him to remain at the orphanage to avoid any danger, but I guess he tagged along without my notice. He saw all of you get surrounded by darkness from afar, and he wouldn't listen no matter how much I told him to escape."

I put my hand on Liam's head and noticed that he was shaking.

"I'm sorry I made you worry," I told him.

"I thought you were going to die too..." he feebly answered between sobs.

That's right... He lost his whole family.

"I'm sorry. That must have been scary. But thanks to you, I'm safe. It's because you ran back to warn everybody."

If he hadn't warned them, Jeord and Keith wouldn't have reached me here, and they wouldn't have been able to comfort me, making my fear go away and allowing me to think of a solution.

“Thank you so much, Liam,” I comforted him, stroking his hair. He started crying even harder, so I rushed to pat his back too.

“How did it look from outside, Mister Cyrus?” Jeord asked.

“I saw the three of you being engulfed by a dark fog which then lingered in place. I did not know whether it would be safe to touch it, so I asked for help from the Ministry. I was waiting for this help to arrive when you made it out.”

“The fog lingered? How wide would you say that area—” Keith was going to ask another question, but Cyrus gestured for him to stop.

“We have a lot to talk about, but let us go back to the orphanage first. The orphanage employees helped me rid this area of other civilians for the moment, but people are eventually going to return, and we would stand out too much. What happened here today is not for the public to know about.”

He had a point—we didn’t want people to know that Dark Magic, which was supposed to be forbidden, had been used here, so we all hurried back to the orphanage.

We left Liam with one of the employees, so that he would be brought to his room to rest, while we went to the director’s office. Maggie was there, and she told us to sit down.

“You probably have Ministry secrets to discuss, so I will excuse myself,” she remarked before leaving the room. She had just wanted to give us a safe place to talk.

Once Maggie had left and we were all sitting down, Cyrus started talking.

“I heard part of it, but I want to know about what happened in more detail. First, I will tell you what I saw, and then you three will tell me what you experienced. Does that sound reasonable?”

We all obviously agreed, as we were also mostly clueless about what had happened.

Cyrus’s recounting went more or less like this:

Jeord and Keith were stretching out their hands toward me, and all three of us were surrounded by the dark fog. The dark fog kept increasing in size until it reached a size close to that of the office that we were currently inside of. It was only slightly taller than Cyrus, but he couldn’t see anything that was happening inside.

He assumed that we were inside the fog, but he considered the possibility that touching it might trap him inside too, and calling

out to us wasn't working. He asked some of the orphanage employees to make sure that nobody walked in on what was happening and contacted the Ministry to get help.

He then noticed that Liam had followed him and tried to persuade him to go back to the orphanage, because staying there would be too dangerous. It was then that the fog started shrinking and the three of us came out of it. That kind of explained how surprised he looked when he saw us jumping out of the fog. He was probably working as hard as he could to come up with a solution, and then we just up and escaped ourselves.

Now it was our turn to explain the events.

When the fog surrounded us, at first we couldn't see or hear anything. After I started talking, we realized that we could hear each other, and after that we found that we could also touch each other. We all moved close together, and then I used the Dark Magic spell I'd been practicing to make the fog go away.

After hearing all of this, Cyrus remained quiet for a while, looking as if he was thinking very hard. Then, he spoke again.

"There is something that does not add up. You talk of walking around and looking for each other, but when seen from outside, the fog was, at most, as large as this room here. There should not have been enough space. Also, the fact that you could not hear anything is weird as well. We could hear just fine even after the fog appeared, and it would be weird for the fog to be enough to block all sound."

Cyrus can sure come up with all kinds of theories just from hearing our short explanation. That's impressive. Had it been me, I could have only come up with a "Dark fog? Wow, that sounds cool," or something.

"It is possible that you were not simply surrounded by the fog, but transported to a different dimension, just as happened to Miss Maria and Lady Katarina when they found the covenants. We will probably need to question you all further about this once we are back at the Ministry. Would you two be able to follow me there right now?" Cyrus then asked Jeord and Keith.

"I had freed up my schedule for the rest of the day to spend all of it with my Katarina, so I would be able to, yes," Jeord replied.

"You didn't even ask her about *her* schedule... Anyway, I would also be able to come," Keith added.

"Perfect. Now, let's go to the Min—"

The office door slammed open, and we all turned to see who

was behind it.

"Lady Katarina!"

Maria, who was clearly out of breath, ran toward me, then grabbed my shoulders and started looking at me from top to bottom as if to check for something.

"Maria?! Why are you here?!" I gaped, confused, while she was still examining my whole body.

"I assume that they sent you here because I told the Ministry that Dark Magic was involved," Cyrus clarified.

"Exactly," she replied after a long pause. "I was actually on a mission nearby when the Ministry contacted me to say that there had been an incident involving Dark Magic. When they told me that Lady Katarina had been on the receiving end of this magic, I came as fast as I could to make sure that she was fine... You do not seem to be hurt anywhere. Are you all right?"

She was looking at me with worried eyes as she asked that. She had probably been inspecting me for wounds.

"I am not hurt, and I feel great. Thank you, Maria," I responded. I instantly saw relief spread across her face. Simultaneously, her legs gave way and she squatted on the ground.

"M-Maria?! Are you okay?!" I asked her while giving her my hand.

"I may have run a bit too fast... The moment that the fear left my body, my legs just started shaking..." she murmured, blushing. Indeed, her legs were still trembling.

She came here so fast just for me...

"Thank you, Maria."

Seeing her like that, I wished I were a man, strong enough to coolly pick her up into my arms and lift her off the ground. I was a girl though.

But hey, all that work in the fields has made me strong enough to handle a hoe without any problem, right?

"No, Big Sister, stop it. Don't even try it."

"He is right, Katarina. Leave that kind of thing to men. Mister Cyrus, would you?"

They know me well enough that they guessed what I was thinking of doing just by the way I was looking at my arms and comparing them to Maria's...

"O-Oh, sure..." Cyrus replied uncomfortably. "W-well, Maria, here..."

His face was bright red as he picked her up, but he was also probably enjoying himself.

Eh eh, good for you, I thought, but I was also a bit sad that I wasn't strong enough to do that myself.

We decided that we would return to the Magical Ministry immediately. The carriage, probably called by Cyrus, was already waiting for us. Maggie and Liam were standing by its side.

"Liam? But I told you to go to your room and rest!" Between the scary incident that he was involved in and the sprint he had to make back to the orphanage, I thought he had to be too exhausted to even stay awake.

He pouted, and Maggie explained with a smile. "I also told him to rest, but he heard that you people were going to leave soon, and he really wanted to tell you goodbye."

Hearing this, his cheeks puffed up a bit. *So cute.*

"Thank you, Liam. Something came up and we have to go back, but I'll come back to visit soon," I vowed, and he anxiously looked up at me.

"For real?"

He really got cute the second he stopped being so angry at everything... But, yeah, just telling him that I will isn't enough, I guess. That gives me an idea.

I took out the handkerchief that I had in my pocket and I placed it inside Liam's little hand. His eyes widened up as he looked at it.

"This is my favorite handkerchief. Can you keep it for me until the next time I come here?"

There was silence.

"I promise I'll come soon," I said, patting his head, and he grabbed at my dress with his free hand. Seeing him torn between wanting to rely on me and being too shy to do it activated my maternal instincts. I hugged him, and he hugged me back.

"You promised..." he mumbled, blushing even harder than he already was.

"Wait for me," I told him while looking him straight in the eye.

We got some parting gifts from the orphanage's children, and then told Liam and Maggie goodbye and boarded the carriage.

"I swear, Katarina, I wish you would at least refrain from seducing children," Jeord griped.

"I must agree with him, Big Sister. I did not think that you had

the brass face to do something so inappropriate," Keith piled on.

"Huh?" I was only half listening to them. *What did he say? Something about grass on my face?*

"Maria, do I have something on my face?!" I asked her after wiping my face with the first piece of cloth I found.

"You do not, Lady Katarina. Do not worry," she answered, to my relief.

Oh, okay. Must have gotten it, then.

Keith and Jeord both let out a loud sigh. After all we'd been through today, I wish they'd be able to forgive some grass on my face, or at the very least tell me about it earlier.

Cyrus, by the way, was riding with the coachman once again. Even though he'd managed to lift Maria off the ground minutes earlier, sitting beside her was apparently too much. I didn't really get it, but the carriage started moving anyway, taking us to the Magical Ministry.

When I walked through the Magical Ministry's gates, I was met by several familiar faces.

"Mary, Sophia, Alan, Nicol! Why are you all here?" I exclaimed, surprised.

Mary, worriedly looking at me with a hand on her mouth, explained, "My spy... I mean, Prince Alan told me that Prince Jeord had left the castle despite not having to do so for any official matters. Worried for you, we rushed to the Ministry, but we heard that you were not working today, and we were just talking about what to do next when we heard that you were involved in a terrible incident..."

It turned out that they already knew that I'd been hit with a Dark Magic spell, and they were all worried sick about me. Mary must have mistakenly said "spy" instead of "Prince Alan" because of how tense she was. Prince Alan himself walked right next to her, holding her as if to keep her from falling.

"We heard that you were safe in the end, but we wanted to make sure, so we were waiting for you," he continued.

"Are you hurt anywhere? Are you wounded?" Sophia asked me, leaning toward me.

"I'm fine, I'm not hurt at all. I'm sorry I made all of you worry," I said, jumping up and down in place to bring home the point of just how fine I was, and my friends seemed to be relieved by seeing that.

Cyrus, who had been talking with one of the gate guards, reached us and spoke to everyone. “I know that you are all worried about Lady Katarina, but we need to question her about what happened. Can I ask you to leave?”

“I will wait here until you are done. I have a lot to ask her too,” Mary replied, and Alan and Sophia both agreed.

“It could take a while,” Cyrus warned.

“I will take responsibility and contact our respective homes,” Nicol spoke without hesitation. “Because I imagined things would play out like this, I have already asked the Ministry to provide a room in which we may wait without standing in anyone’s way.”

Hearing this, Cyrus allowed everyone to stay. *Nicol is always prepared for everything.*

I promised my friends that I’d see them as soon as I was done, and then, together with Jeord, Keith, and Maria, I followed Cyrus into the room where we would be questioned about the incident. Even though Maria hadn’t been involved directly, Cyrus thought that the opinion of a Wielder of Light could be useful to understand the Dark Magic we’d run into.

Larna and Raphael were already waiting for us inside the room.

“Good to see you all in one piece,” Larna greeted us, taking a good look at me before turning around to look at Raphael. “He’s here because Lady Katarina was able to defeat the Dark Magic spell cast against her with the one that Raphael taught her, so I also want his opinion.”

Raphael nodded understandingly, then looked at me and smiled. He didn’t say anything, but his face told me that he was glad to see that I was safe.

I smiled back, knowing that I owed it to him and his lessons that I’d been able to come back unscathed.

We all sat down, and Larna started talking again. “Okay. Let’s hear the details.”

“Yes. We should start with what these three and I witnessed,” Cyrus began, and he went on to recount what we’d already told each other at the orphanage.

“Oh, that sounds very interesting... I mean dangerous. I’m really glad you’re all safe,” Larna corrected herself, but was unable to completely hide what she was really thinking, and then she looked at me again. “I had heard that your Dark Magic spells weren’t exactly the most powerful yet, but you must have improved, since

you were able to absorb so much darkness," she commented curiously.

"I'm not sure. I think I'm just better at absorbing darkness than I am at creating it."

"Could you try it out for me then?" she asked.

I agreed and produced my wand, surprising Jeord and Keith, who had never seen it. Larna's eyes were already brimming with anticipation. I tried shouting and waving my wand, but, as usual, I only got a tiny speck of darkness to appear.

I bet I'm just better at absorbing it. I didn't feel like I'd become more powerful or anything back then either.

Jeord and Keith, who had only seen the tiny white dot, were now shocked at seeing the black one, making me feel a bit embarrassed about it.

"It's just as she said. What do you think, Raphael?" Larna sounded disappointed.

"I'm afraid that we don't know enough about Dark Magic to fully understand this event. We don't even know what kind of spell that woman used against them in the first place."

"You're right. Trapping them inside a dark fog... What kind of spell is that? I wish I could have seen it myself..."

As usual, Larna was greatly interested in any kind of weird or rare magic. If Dark Magic didn't require human sacrifice and wasn't forbidden, she probably would have started wielding it immediately, even if it was dangerous. She now seemed to have remembered something, and she spoke again.

"Oh, right. Lady Katarina. It seems that only you and that kid from the orphanage saw the woman who attacked you. Can you describe what she looked like?"

"Of course," I replied. Liam and I had seen our attacker, but Jeord and Keith had not. Cyrus hadn't asked me about her either, probably because he had already heard all that he wanted to hear from Liam.

I tried thinking back to when we ran into her.

"I couldn't tell what she was thinking at any point, and I couldn't even read her facial expression," I explained. "Are you sure that she is the dangerous individual that you have been talking about?"

"She's a black-haired girl who looks to be around your age and can use Dark Magic. I doubt there's more than one person who fits

that description," she replied.

Good point. At least I hope *that there's not more than one.*

"By the way, she goes by Sarah," Larna told me.

"We know her name?"

"It could be a fake name. We don't know if she even has a 'real' name."

"What? How could that be?" I asked, confused, and I felt the atmosphere in the room getting gloomier.

"Larna... Shall we tell them?" Cyrus asked with a serious look on his face.

"They're already too deep in this business, and they're probably going to get involved even further. I think we should."

"I see. Your decision then," Cyrus assented and then went silent.

Their brief exchange was enough to understand that whatever they were discussing wasn't anything good.

"I'm going to tell you of our theories about this Sarah girl. Consider all of this top secret," Larna instructed, and then she started explaining.

She talked of the children held by the Dieke family, of the Dark Magic experiments performed on them, and of how their captors disposed of them to avoid being found out. Hearing this was painful, and the expressions on the faces of those sitting around me showed that it was painful for them as well.

"We still don't know what she has been through, where she lives, or what she is up to right now. All we know is that there's somebody very powerful giving her orders. You'd better be careful if you run into her again," Larna finished.

According to her theory, Sarah had been used to perform Dark Magic experiments as a child, and was now being used by someone else for unknown purposes. She was supposed to be scary and threatening, but after hearing all this I couldn't help but think of her as a poor lost child.

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"Katarina Claes has returned to the Magical Ministry, Sarah," he informed me.

I was surprised. I did not expect her to be back so soon. The rumors said that her magic powers were really weak, but maybe

that did not apply for her Dark Magic ones.

"I didn't think you would do something as uncouth as using Dark Magic in such a public place," he added. His voice didn't have any emotion in it, but his choice of words made me feel that he was scolding me.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, and he looked at me in surprise.

"I wasn't trying to scold you. I was honestly just surprised, and I wanted to know why someone as coolheaded as you would act in that way."

After all, he didn't mean to reprimand me, but, regardless, he was right—I'd lost my cool.

"After all this interference from *her*, I may have felt slightly frustrated," I explained.

"I see. She meddled with you once again after all. But there's no use crying over spilt milk. You must be tired, so you can go and rest while I take care of things." He gestured toward the room's exit.

I lowered my head and left. He was the most important person in the world to me, and before now, I had never lied to him. This wasn't exactly a lie, but I hadn't told him the whole truth either. I was frustrated because of Katarina Claes interfering with my mission, that much was true...but there was more.

"You're right, I wouldn't know. I've always lived here, in this peaceful place. I don't know anything about violence and hardship...but that doesn't mean that I can't be on your side. Both me and all the people in the orphanage. We're on your side, Liam. Even if we don't know about your past, we can try to understand. If you just reach out your hand, we'll take it."

When I heard her speak those words, I felt my heart throb uncomfortably—even though she wasn't saying those things to me.

"Liam, parting with the happiness that you've grown accustomed to is dreadful, but the memory of that happiness will give you the strength to fight through anything. So, I want you to be happy at the orphanage. I'm sure that happiness will make you stronger."

She went on to say this, and her words brought back memories which I thought I had forgotten forever.

Even before being trapped in that dark place, I was never that happy.

My father, who was so busy with work that he rarely came back home, disappeared altogether, and I was left alone with my mother.

She closed herself up, and my words stopped reaching her.

We often had nothing to eat, and when this happened I had to walk around the whole neighborhood looking for anything edible just so as not to starve. It was at one such time that I met him. He was a boy around my age, crouching in the tall grass as if to hide himself.

"What are you doing?" I asked him.

"I'm hiding."

His eyes were full of sadness, and they reminded me of my own.

"Can I sit with you?"

He looked at me with surprise, but eventually told me, "Sure," and I walked over to him.

We didn't even talk to each other, but just being there, with him, made me feel at peace.

"I have to go back home," the boy spoke once more as the sun was starting to set.

"Will you come here again?"

"I don't know," he responded, sadly looking at me as he shook his head.

Even though he had told me that, the next day I went to the same place. He wasn't hiding in the same spot where we'd been sitting the day before, but I kept looking for him and I eventually found him not far away.

"Can I sit with you?" I asked again, and he stared at me, just as surprised as on the day before, and gave me the same answer. This is how we got to know each other.

I started visiting that place every day. The boy wasn't always there, but whenever he was I would sit by his side. Little by little he started talking and even eating some of the fruit that I'd found. I loved the time that we spent together.

He became more and more emaciated, until at one point, looking very sick, he told me that he didn't know if he'd be able to come there anymore. On the last day we met, he gave me a small pressed flower. Even when I was surrounded by darkness, the flower, which I kept in my pocket, always kept me company.

I had taken the memories of all these events and sealed them away in the dark, where I wouldn't have to think about them—until now. My heart was throbbing and I couldn't calm down.

Why am I remembering all of this? I have to forget all of it again, or

I won't be able to get a hold of myself, I thought, but the memories wouldn't go away.

I bit my lip so hard that it started bleeding.

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"Okay. I've heard enough. If you remember anything else, let me know," Larna said, and our questioning was over.

Between all that happened and having to go to the Ministry on an off day, I'd ended up really tired.

"Cyrus and I have to report to the higher-ups, so we'll get going. Raphael, Maria, go back to your departments. You can go back home now if you want, Lady Katarina," she added.

As Raphael was leaving, I called out to him to say thank you.

"Who knows what would have happened if it weren't for the spell you taught me! And what you thought about Liam was spot on too. Thanks to you I found the words I needed to help him. You're amazing, Raphael. Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me. You were the one who used the spell, and you were the one who saved Liam. You are the amazing one," he responded with a kind smile on his face.

Just like Maria and Cyrus, Raphael was also the very humble type. He'd probably answer in the same way no matter how much I praised him.

"At least let me give you this to show you my gratitude," I said, handing him a paper bag.

"What is this?" he asked, surprised.

"They're the cookies that the orphanage children gave us. They gave us so many! Please take some. Thank you for everything, Raphael," I told him, lowering my voice, and he blushed.

We parted ways with Raphael and Maria. Afterward, Jeord, Keith, and I headed for the room where the others were waiting for me.

"You and Raphael seem to have become very close to each other," Jeord commented along the way.

"Hmm? What are you trying to say?"

"Big Sister," Keith joined in, "I was also surprised. Those magic lessons you are taking... Are you two alone when he's teaching you?"

I found myself being questioned from both sides.

“Of course. It *is* forbidden magic after all, so very few people can know about it. Is that so weird?” I asked, and both of them sighed.

“Of course, she is missing the point entirely. That being said, I doubt that Raphael Wolt would act uncouthly... I hope.”

“I believe that he can be trusted...probably. And, Big Sister, I’ve told you so many times already, but you should be more self-aware as a lady.”

Jeord and Keith ended up warning me in a slightly offensive way.

I thought that Raphael was the last person in the Ministry that one should need to be warned against, but I also realized that contradicting them would be a waste of time.

“Okay, I’ll be careful. Oh, here we are,” I said and then knocked on the door of the room where Mary and the others were.

“I was waiting for you!” Mary came to hug me as soon as I entered the room.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” I apologized, but she shook her head.

“There is no need to apologize. Waiting for you was our decision,” she affirmed, and the others nodded along.

“So, may we know what happened today? I heard that you ended up in quite the dangerous situation,” Nicol asked me with a dead serious look in his eyes.

“Well...” I started explaining all the events of the day, except for the details about Sarah that we’d heard from Larna. Jeord and Keith helped me out too.

“This must have been very taxing on you,” Sophia commented at the end, and I couldn’t help but agree.

“You managed to come back unscathed after having a Dark Magic spell cast on you... That is impressive,” Nicol remarked, surprised.

“I am so glad to see that she is okay,” his little sister added with a smile.

“Who knew that a spell like that even existed though? I have to give you credit for keeping your cool and using the magic at your disposal to get out of trouble, Katarina,” Alan told me, sounding genuinely impressed.

“Not at all. I was very scared at first, until I found out that Prince Jeord and Keith were with me. If it weren’t for them, I

wouldn't have managed it."

Had I been trapped inside that dark fog alone, I don't think I'd have made it out safely. I was really grateful for their presence.

"So, that is to say... You were trapped along with these two, and in a dark place no less. Did...anything *happen* to you?" Mary asked in an uncharacteristically awkward way.

"Not at all. I'm not hurt anywhere. Not even a scratch," I comforted my worried friend.

"Hmm, no, that is not what I am referring to. I mean...did those two do anything to you?"

"Huh?" I cocked my head to one side, unsure of what she meant.

Jeord and Keith both spoke at the same time.

"Mary, please. The place was too dark to do anything anyway. Of course, a gentleman such as myself would never dream of doing anything unbecoming to her regardless."

"Of course not, Mary! I would never do such a thing!"

Mary's eyes seemed to go slightly dark.

"We shall discuss the definition of 'gentleman' at another time," she snapped, "but for the moment, I cannot help but remember certain high-society rumors of how you, in fact, often act unbecomingly regardless of the location or situation."

"Where'd you even hear rumors like those?" Alan mumbled, scratching his head.

"Katarina, do not be misled by such unfounded rumors. I am a gentleman and would never do anything to you. You are safe with me."

"Oh, um, sure," I replied despite having absolutely no clue what they were even talking about.

Jeord offered me his hand, and I instinctively went to take it, but Keith quickly jumped in between us.

"I would say she is most certainly not safe with Prince Jeord."

"Rich words, Keith, coming from one who says 'I would never do such a thing' and yet took advantage of the darkness to have Katarina touch him heaven-knows-where."

"Th-That was just her moving her hands around, and I had no..."

"Master Keith?! Were you lying? Is that shyness of yours just a facade to hide your misdeeds?!"

"No, Mary, please, listen!"

“Master Keith... I was not expecting such behavior...”

“I feel betrayed, Keith.”

“Sophia! Master Nicol! I swear this is a misunderstanding!”

“I feel for you.”

“Prince Alan! What is that look supposed to mean?! You are all misunderstanding this!”

Seeing all of them chatting in their usual friendly way brought a smile to my face. Thinking that I was all alone in that dark place, under a Dark Magic spell, had been terrifying. Knowing about FL2’s secret character and the potential doom that was waiting for me made it even scarier...but having Jeord and Keith by my side made everything better, and now having my friends surround me like this increased the good vibes even more.

“I want all of you to always stay by my side,” I muttered to myself, but they somehow all heard.

“Of course. I, Mary Hunt, shall be by your side forever. Next time, I’ll come with you into the dark fog too.”

“I guess I can be there too if you really want.”

“Of course, I will be with you too.”

“That goes without saying for me too.”

“I shall be by your side forever, as long as you wish for it.”

“I’d never leave you, Big Sister.”

“I would follow you anywhere, Katarina.”

“Thank you, everyone.”

I didn’t know what was waiting for me…but I knew that I’d be fine.

Afterword

Hello everyone, Satoru Yamaguchi here.

With the tenth volume of *My Next Life as a Villainess*, we finally reached the double digits. I could barely believe it when the second volume came out! If I went back in time and told myself that one day we would reach volume ten, I would probably jump up in surprise. It's really amazing!

Of course, this is all thanks to you, the readers. You have all of my gratitude.

Last year, when the anime aired, the support it received from the fans blew me away. Every single week, I waited in front of the TV for the new episode to air, and I enjoyed every minute of it. I really want to thank the people who made this story into such a beautiful anime. Now there is even a second season scheduled to air in July. I cannot wait to see the characters that did not show up in the first season!

Thank you all so much.

I am also looking forward to the game's release! I started writing this story based on an otome game, so I am incredibly excited at the idea of it being turned into one. I am counting the days until its release, and I am happy that so many talented people are creating such wonderful products based on Katarina's stories.

The game's creators even ran the script by me for approval, and it was a very fun experience. I decided not to ask them to follow all of the book's details—as long as the story's background was left intact, I wanted them to have the freedom to be creative with the characters. This means that the story you will find in the game is a what-if alternate reality of sorts, and I am sure you will find it very entertaining.

In this volume, we took a look at Katarina's life working at the Ministry after her Ocean Harbor mission is over. Having obtained the Dark Covenant, she has to practice Dark Magic...but this is very

difficult for her, and she finds some solace working in the fields.

Then, together with Cyrus, she goes to an orphanage to deliver the fruits of her agricultural labor, but the rest of the crew also tags along, and they get involved in...well, you will see! A character that we have not seen in a while also makes a surprise comeback. Enjoy!

Finally, I want to thank Hidaka Nami for the beautiful illustrations, as well as the editors, and all the people without whom this book could not have been made.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart,

Satoru Yamaguchi

Bonus Short Stories

Mary

"Make sure you report on everything that your brother Jeord does," I ordered my fiancé.

"Sure, Mary," he replied hesitantly.

"Let's meet again when the time comes, then."

"Okay."

I told him goodbye, then rode in the carriage that would bring me back home.

As soon as it was decided that we would be accompanying Katarina on one of her outings, I used all of my high-society connections to keep Jeord from knowing anything about it. I could not prevent Keith from joining the excursion as he was Katarina's brother, nor Nicol, as his sister Sophia was also coming with us, but those two posed little threat anyway. The problem was Jeord. He would no doubt try to take her all for himself.

He would definitely try to ride in the same carriage as her, and he might even go as far as preparing one just for the two of them. I was ready to put up a fight to stop him, of course, but I knew how difficult that could prove. The easier option was to go without him, but asking him to refrain from coming would be of no use, and so I had no choice but to leave him in the dark.

Unfair as that was to him, the love in a lady's heart knows no rules. This would be my first opportunity to see Katarina in quite a while, and I wanted to enjoy it as much as possible. That was why I had asked my fiancé Alan to spy on his brother Jeord. As payment for his spying services, I would allow him to join us and Katarina.

Alan and I had been engaged to each other for a few years now. Despite this engagement being nothing more than a formality, we were on very good terms. If anything, we had become closer friends than we were before. Alan was a simple man, which made him easy to manipulate as well as pleasant to spend time with. Even when asking him to spy on his brother, he agreed without a single

complaint.

Jeord would never agree so easily to a proposal of mine. Whenever we were in the same room, the two of us were always arguing. Maybe we hated each other so much because of how similar we were, and this made me very glad to have Alan as my fiancé.

My carriage reached its destination. As I stepped out of it, I was already excited at the idea of going out with Katarina in a few days. Maria was probably going to bring her sweets, and Sophia was going to bring her books. I thought of what I could bring her to make her happy, and I eventually settled on some fine tea. My heart was brimming with anticipation.

Sophia

I, Sophia Ascart, was beside myself with anticipation. The reason for this was that, for the first time in what felt like forever, I was to enjoy an outing with my beloved Katarina. Since she had started her work at the Magical Ministry, such occasions had become extremely rare.

I filled my bag with some carefully chosen novels to show her, and then, with the help of my maids, I selected an outfit that would not make me stand out too much, as I was supposed to dress as a common merchant.

I was very excited for this rare opportunity, so much so that I doubted I would be getting any sleep on the night prior to the outing. If my dear brother, serious as he always is, knew about this, he would certainly tell me to calm down.

I was also anticipating being able to spend time with him, something that had become increasingly difficult ever since he had graduated from the academy and had started training under father to learn about his work.

Indeed, I had asked him to schedule a day off as soon as I knew that we would be accompanying Katarina. I wanted him to see her too. I knew well that he had had feelings for Katarina since they both were little children, but he had never expressed these feelings in any way, for Katarina was already betrothed to Prince Jeord.

However, despite their engagement, Jeord's love for his fiancée was completely unrequited, which made me believe that, as long as my brother was able to win her over, there would be no problem

whatsoever. After all, that was how father came to be married to mother; big brother, however, had not known of this until I told him.

Big brother's incredible beauty was enough to captivate anyone, man and woman alike, and he was as kind and intelligent as he was handsome. A man as perfect as he was would have no problem capturing Katarina's heart.

How could I help him become more active in the pursuit of his love? I asked myself, losing what little sleepiness I still had. At this rate, I would remain awake until dawn and wind up drowsy for the whole following day.

I decided to drink some warm milk to aid my sleep. As the maids, having helped me with the choice of outfit, had already left for their chambers, I went to the kitchen myself. I thought that even if none of the servants was there, surely I would be able to warm up some milk. I could not cook, but warming milk hardly counted as cooking.

Then again, if only I could cook as well as Maria, I could offer Katarina the treats she loved so much. Unfortunately, noble ladies were not educated in the ways of pans and pots.

Maybe it is not too late to start learning, even if I can never reach Maria's level... I thought as I walked through the hallway. I was relieved to see some light coming out of the kitchen's door, telling me that there still was someone inside.

"Excuse me," I called, expecting a servant to answer, but the person I found inside surprised me.

"Big brother?!" I asked.

"Sophia?" he answered. He had a knife in his hand. I could not understand what I was seeing.

"What are you doing...?"

He hesitated. "I'm preparing food for tomorrow," he explained, blushing.

"Food? *You* are preparing it?" I asked, and he nodded in reply. I remembered that, just after dinner, he had mentioned that we could use a light meal during the long carriage trip we were going to sit through the next day.

I thought that he would ask the servants to prepare something, but I certainly never imagined that he would be cooking himself. Actually, I never imagined that he could even cook in the first place! Then again, perfect as he was, the fact that he also possessed

this skill should not have been that much of a surprise.

"You must be very excited about tomorrow," I observed, seeing how he was staying up this late to prepare.

"I guess I must be," he replied after a pause, now completely red in the face.

He usually was so calm and collected that such displays of excitement were incredibly rare. He would normally be the one telling me to calm down.

"Heh heh, you will be seeing Lady Katarina for the first time in a while, after all," I said.

"Of course that is part of it, but I'm also looking forward to spending some time with everyone," he replied, awkwardly trying to hide his smile.

His normally unyielding facial expression made it hard to realize, but big brother loved spending time with his friends.

"I will help you," I announced, rolling up my sleeves.

"I appreciate it, but you should go to sleep. It is late and you risk not being able to wake up on time tomorrow."

I pouted my lips, annoyed that he would say that despite being anything but an early bird himself. Nonetheless, he quickly warmed up some milk for me and sent me back to my room.

The warmth of the milk big brother had given me made me quickly forget my annoyance, and sent me drifting into sleep.

The following morning, as I got up, I found him already awake, with all kinds of delicious-looking foods ready by his side.

Truly, big brother is an incredible man.

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My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 10
by Satoru Yamaguchi

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Edited by Jonathan Engel

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